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THREE EXQUISITE **PINEGROVE STRAPS** INSIDE

Issue 496

Guitarist

APRIL 2023

TONE HEAVEN

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO SOUNDING GREAT ON GUITAR

With Tips From

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STEVE LUKATHER
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DAVID GRISSOM
PAUL GILBERT
& More

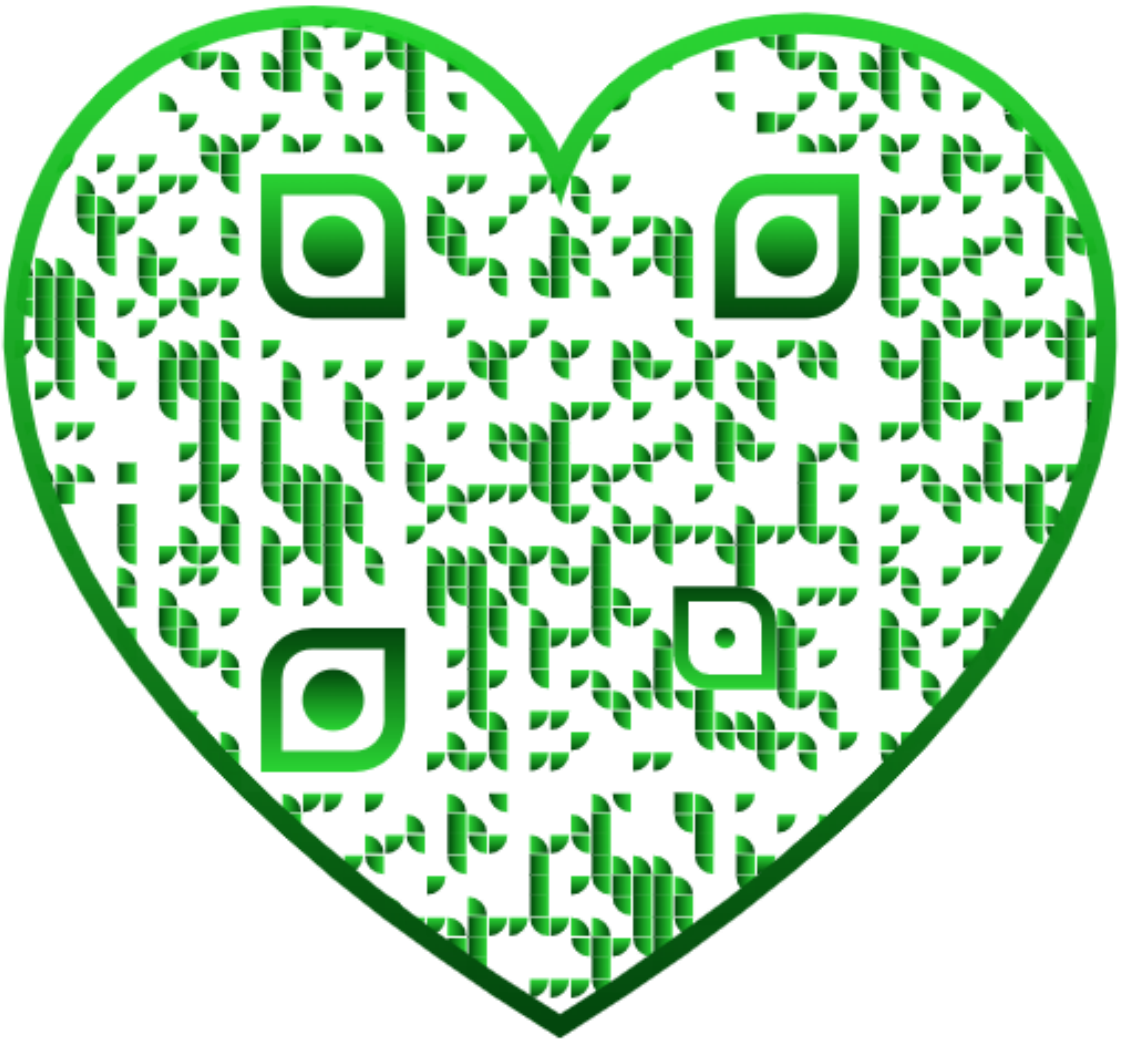
TOM VERLAINE

THE NEW WAVE ICON WHO MADE THE JAZZMASTER SING

SOLDANO SLO

DOES THIS NEW PEDAL NAIL THE LEGENDARY LEAD TONE?

FUTURE



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Known Unknowns

If you were paying attention to the news in the past few weeks, you might have come across a rather startling headline. This year, a Grammy – the music world's equivalent of an Oscar – for Song Of The Year was awarded to celebrated guitarist and singer Bonnie Raitt, for the track *Just Like That* from her latest album of the same name (it also won the award for Best American Roots Song, with *Made Up Mind* winning Best Americana Performance). Of course, Raitt's career has unfolded in anything but a 'just like that' manner. Her debut album came out in 1971 and, over the course of a 50-plus-year career she has won 13 Grammy Awards and no less than 30 nominations. It's hard to think of a more illustrious and consistent contribution to guitar music, in some ways, given the quality of her playing, singing and recordings throughout.

So it was rather shocking to see the website of at least one major newspaper breathlessly claim that 'an unknown blues singer' had snatched a Grammy for Song Of The Year. Who could this total newcomer be, this mysterious *ingénue* who had strayed, blinking, into the spotlight? Why, Bonnie Raitt! I'm sure the 'unknown blues singer' in question will enjoy placing the award beside the others on her mantelpiece... Talk about beginner's luck.

While it's tempting to ascribe this risibly bad headline to lazy journalism or a cynical attempt at clickbait, it represents a more troubling trend. If a dazzling career in guitar music lasting over half a century (and counting) can be misrepresented so easily, it means that we all need to do as much as we can to promote guitar music – to help people understand how it can bring so much joy and solace, and so that it doesn't slip off the cultural radar entirely in this post-rock 'n' roll era. Do that and all of us genuinely 'unknown blues singers' out there playing pubs might be in with a shot of a Grammy some day. Well, we can dream... Enjoy the issue and see you next time.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor's Highlights

Kavus Torabi
He's a tireless explorer among the outer realms of guitar music. We meet the Gong and Steve Hillage Band powerhouse on **p54**

Serious Student
Fender's Princeton dates back to 1946, but its latest incarnation is a genuinely compelling digital update on the old design **p8**

Vinnie Moore
It's been a while since we've featured Mr Moore's ample talents, but his new album is devilishly good. We find out how he did it on **p32**

COVER: DAVID CROSBY PHOTO BY LUCIANO VITI/GETTY IMAGES

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- Mark Lettieri
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Olly Curtis

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Tone Heaven

60 In our ultimate guide to sounding great on guitar, we bring you 30 easy mods to help shape up your sound, with insights from the industry's finest makers and players on how to achieve the most divine tone

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To enjoy all of the video and audio content in this issue, type the following link into your browser and follow the instructions in the post entitled 'Guitarist video and audio': **http://bit.ly/guitaristextra**

music radar SCAN TO GET OUR WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

FENDER TONE MASTER PRINCETON REVERB 1 X10 COMBO
£899

WHAT IS IT? The fourth addition to Fender's Tone Master range, using high-powered digital technology to replicate its classic 60s amp designs

Back To School

Fender's student amp returns in digital guise as part of the brand's exciting and thought-provoking Tone Master series. But can it match the real thing? We take a look

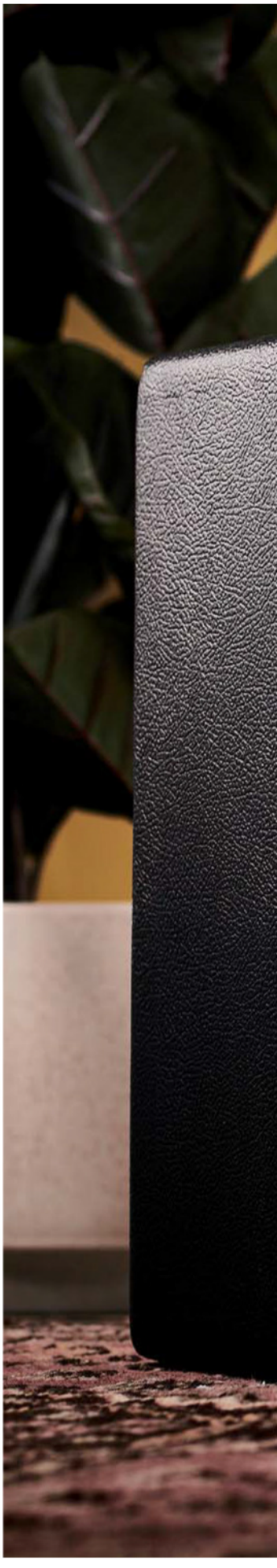
Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Phil Barker

Leo Fender began building amplifiers under his own name in 1946, half a decade before the Telecaster, with the original trio of the Princeton, Deluxe and Professional. Often referred to as the 'woody' amps, because of their hardwood cabinets and fixed wooden handles, these were the first Fender-badged products made after Leo's short-lived venture with Clayton Orr 'Doc' Kauffman (the 'K' in K&F Manufacturing).

Ever since, the Princeton name has survived in various guises, with the mid-1960s valve-powered black-panel Princeton Reverb revered by many guitarists as one of the top three from the pre-CBS Fullerton era. More recently in 2019, Fender surprised a lot of people with the Tone Master range – recreations of those classic 60s amplifiers that replaced traditional valve circuitry with modern digital signal processing and Class D output power. We've already experienced the Deluxe and Twin Reverb, followed by the Super Reverb, now it's time to welcome amp number four in the Tone Master range, the Princeton Reverb.

Viewed from the front, this amp is almost identical to the classic mid-60s design, with a period-correct badge and silver sparkle grille cloth adding to the vintage vibe. The only difference is a discreet 'Tone Master' plate in the bottom right corner. Just like the original, the cabinet is pine, covered in black Tolex, with chrome strap washers securing the aluminium chassis and a smart black carry handle with chrome caps.

While the Tone Master Princeton Reverb's chassis is a similar size and shape to its valve cousins, the electronics are very different. There are no valves and no heavy transformers. Instead, you'll find lots of SMD components and microprocessors densely packed on high-quality circuit boards, joined by ribbon cables. The loudspeaker is a reissue Jensen C10R, which was a common partner for the original amp. Originally manufactured in Chicago, modern Jensens are made in Italy



A straight-up repeat of the classic mid-60s design, the Tone Master Princeton Reverb's front-panel features include a pair of high- and low-gain input jacks, together with knobs for volume, treble, bass, reverb level and vibrato (tremolo) speed and intensity

1. Unlike the Tone Master Deluxe and Twin Reverb, which use lightweight neodymium drivers, the Princeton Reverb uses the Jensen C10R, a superb reissue of the speaker many original 60s Princetons were equipped with

2. Like other Tone Master amps, the Princeton Reverb has a universal mains input that works with any wall voltage from 100 to 240 volts. The Mute switch replaces the original Standby function, cutting the speaker audio but leaving the DI output active, for quiet stage or recording use. The jewel mains indicator glows amber in mute mode and red with the loudspeaker active

1

The frequency range of the 10-inch driver and smaller cabinet are characteristics that made the 60s valve version a studio favourite

2

by Sica, who build excellent reproductions of the classic models alongside new designs, such as the neodymium N12K drivers loaded in the Tone Master Deluxe and Twin Reverb. There's no provision for plugging in external speakers, although the Tone Master's DI can connect to a PA.

The Princeton's front panel stays true to the original, with a pair of high- and low-gain input jacks, followed by controls for volume, treble, bass, reverb level, vibrato speed and intensity. On the rear panel there's a universal voltage mains socket and a pair of power and mute switches, followed by an output power selector switch that reduces the virtual 12 watts of valve power to six, three, 1.5, 0.75 and 0.3 watts. Towards the right, there's a balanced XLR line out with a level control and ground lift switch, together with a selector for two cabinet simulations plus a bypass. Lastly, there's a single jack socket for the Princeton's two-button footswitch, which toggles the reverb and vibrato effects.

The 'vibrato' term is historically incorrect; the effect is actually tremolo, but the vibrato name stuck and has been there for six decades. Overall, the Tone Master Princeton Reverb looks the part, it's built to the same high standards as the valve equivalent and yet weighs about a third less.

Feel & Sounds

The Tone Master Princeton Reverb's jewel power indicator light flashes red and amber for a few seconds as the software boots up, after which the amp is ready for use. Background noise is noticeable by its absence; there's practically zero hiss or hum. However, the tone is pure black-panel Fender, with a sweet high-end, slightly scooped midrange and a generous bass. The amp is equally flattering to single coils and humbuckers, responding as you'd expect with slightly more drive when a Les Paul is plugged in. It's a little tighter-sounding than the Deluxe or Twin due to the slightly more compressed frequency range of the 10-inch driver and smaller cabinet – characteristics that made the 60s valve version a studio favourite.

Generally, the effects are very good. The tremolo range covers deep, slow Americana pulses to a fast stutter, although the intensity fades somewhat as the speed rises, which is common on many originals as the range is partly determined by the fixed bias setting. The Tone Master's digital convolution reverb effect is maybe a little brighter than some 60s Fender amps we've used, although the detail is spookily accurate – you can almost hear the notes ping-pong between transducers in the virtual spring.

3

To capture this, Fender has leveraged huge amounts of processing power, using half of a high-spec quad-core DSP just for the reverb, a whole core for the amp sound, and the remaining core for the cabinet simulations. This Princeton Reverb's digital tremolo effect was arrived at after comparing many vintage originals, and represents what Fender considers to be the best all-round combination of waveform, amplitude and speed range. Likewise with the reverb, where the characteristics of Fender's transformer-coupled spring circuit were analysed to arrive at an ideal version. In the original amp, the tremolo effect was achieved by varying the output valve bias and came after the reverb, creating a subtle 'ducking' effect when the amp was played harder, which the Tone Master also gets.

Fender has also recreated the Princeton's valve-rectified squash and sag dynamics when the amp is played at higher volume levels, as well as the rich overdrive that starts to bare its teeth at around the halfway mark. Even with just 12 watts, a valve Princeton turned all the way up can be unsociably loud, but thanks to the power reduction switch on the rear panel you can reduce the virtual valve output power in six steps down to just 0.3 watts, so you can experiment with non-master volume overdrive at home-friendly levels.

> The detail of the reverb effect is spookily accurate – you can almost hear the notes ping-pong between transducers in the virtual spring

Generally, the Tone Master works fine with various pedal combinations, too. Delays and modulation effects sound great, but we found that some overdrives can sound a little stressed if their output level is pushed too high.

The DI output stays active when the amp is put into mute mode, which is handy for recording and quiet stage environments. Meanwhile, the built-in impulse response cabinet emulations are as good as some of the best standalone effects we've heard, with a choice of ribbon or dynamic microphone simulations.

Used live, the combination of the lightweight resonant pine cabinet and superb Jensen speaker inside help to make

3. As with other Tone Master amps, the Princeton Reverb has a six-position switch that progressively steps down the output power from 12 virtual valve watts to six, three, 1.5, 0.75 and 0.3 watts. The DI output offers a choice of two mic/cab impulse responses, plus a bypass

4. The amp retains the period-correct look of the 60s original, with this simple 'Tone Master' plate being the only visual difference

4

A silver-sparkle grille and period-correct badge add to the vintage vibe, quite a contrast to the high-powered digital electronics inside. Behind the grille cloth, the cabinet is made from pine, just like original Fender amps

the Tone Master sound very close to the real deal, with virtually identical overdrive and dynamic response.

Verdict

We've grown used to digital modelling products offering practically infinite amplifier and effects simulations. They're usually great savers of time and space and certainly have their place for guitarists at all levels. At the top end, heavy duty processing power combined with reliability and consistency has already convinced many professionals to leave their valve amp collection at home and use digital solutions on tour.

Fender's approach with the Tone Master amps is very different, and yet we think it's just as valid. The team has replicated some of the company's most iconic products in the digital domain, with no menus or presets. They look, sound and respond very close to their 60s valve counterparts – except, no valves. Any guitarist who uses vintage valve amplifiers to earn a living will tell you it's often a war of attrition to keep them working reliably, while modern valve amps are sometimes constrained by variations in valve quality and consistency, making it difficult to preserve subtle nuances of tone, especially in high-gain designs. And that's without ongoing supply difficulties, which have more or less doubled the price of most bread and butter replacement valves.

> The Tone Master sounds very close to the real deal, with virtually identical overdrive and dynamic response

As for the price? Yes, it's expensive for a digital combo, until you compare it with the equivalent valve versions in Fender's catalogue. All things considered, the Tone Master Princeton Reverb is good value for money and ideal for serious amateurs and professional players in many musical genres. If you're after the vintage Fender vibe without the weight and maintenance, it's got to be on your list. G

FENDER TONE MASTER PRINCETON REVERB 1X10 COMBO

PRICE: £899
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Digital preamp, Class D power amp
OUTPUT: 50Ws RMS into 8 ohms (simulating 12W valve power)
DIMENSIONS: 505 (w) x 241 (d) x 406mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 9/20
CABINET: Pine
LOUDSPEAKERS: 1 x 10" Jensen C10R
CHANNELS: 1, with high and low gain inputs
CONTROLS: Volume, treble, bass, reverb level, vibrato (tremolo) speed and intensity
FOOTSWITCH: Two-button switch (supplied) toggles reverb and vibrato (tremolo) effect
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: 6-position output power switch steps virtual valve power down from 12W watts to 6, 3, 1.5, 0.75, 0.3W. Balanced mono line out on XLR with level control, ground lift and two cab sims plus bypass. USB socket for future firmware updates
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: Fender's Tone Master range includes the Twin Reverb at £1,039 (a blonde vinyl Celestion-loaded version is £1,089); the Super Reverb (loaded with Jensen P10R's) is £1,249; the Deluxe Reverb costs £929 (a blonde Celestion-loaded version is £949).

Fender Musical Instruments EMEA
01342 331700
www.fender.com

8/10

PROS Almost perfect digital replica of the mid-60s black-panel Princeton Reverb but with no valves and no reverb springs to break; same good looks, almost exactly the same sounds; roughly a third less weight

CONS Little pricey for an all-digital amp; an input clip indicator would be handy for pedal users; tremolo effect could do with more range and intensity

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C9 CUSTOM VENTURA STANDARD
£995

WHAT IS IT? Classy modern offset all made and finished in the UK, including the unique-looking single-coil pickups

Northern Light

A new guitar-making venture in the North East of England promises some boutique-like style at everyday prices

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Neil Godwin

We have a rich industry of guitar makers here in the UK, but not all of their fabulous instruments can be classed as affordable. Well, affordability is the premise behind C9 Custom Guitars: a partnership between experienced production guitar specialist Mark Lamaq and high-end machinehead-maker Keith Robson, who has turned his attention to guitar making in the past few years. The duo only formed the company in 2022 (though Mark had previously been helping Keith to create instruments under the Robson brand), but they've already attracted the attention of Northern heroes such as Tim Burgess, Mani and Paul Arthurs.

Our review guitar, the Ventura, is effectively a production prototype and is one of three models in the range. So while it's early days for C9, this guitar illustrates the intended style and vibe, which is perhaps best described as 'affordable boutique'. But what does that actually mean? First of all, 90 per cent of the guitar is made in the UK, in Shiney Row, Houghton Le Spring, just outside of Sunderland. The woodworking is very clean, with a slab body

1. These stained maple pickup covers are machined in-house, although underneath is a pretty classic single-coil pickup

2. On the production guitars, that slightly unmatched cover for the two-way truss rod will be replaced with a maple plug, and bone nuts will be standard

that's approximately 41mm thick made from grandis, "a FSC-certified wood used in the building industry, for example", Mark explains. "It's like a slightly lighter African mahogany, although the weight can vary between super light and ordinary." There are no curved contours and, instead of being radiused, the edges have a light chamfer (as used, for example, by PJD on its start-up Standard models) that's increased in width where you'd normally expect a curved forearm and rib-cut contour. The relatively large offset body size does contribute to the weight, but it still drops in about 'right' for its Jazzmaster-inspired style.

Both neck and body are finished in-house with a very thin satin polyurethane, the neck clear-coated with no tint.

With the guitars coming in around £1k, the hardware isn't made in the UK. It's worth noting, though, that the perfectly serviceable Wilkinson EZ-Lok tuners are designed here, with dual holes in the post so you can tie-lock the strings. The Jazzmaster/Jaguar-style vibrato with matching separate bridge is more generic, but it's a perfectly good unit, despite lacking the tuning lock of the original design. The system was nicely set up and, once the guitar had settled in, its tuning stability was perfectly good.

3. The usual block heel is slightly rounded with an edge chamfer, while the neck screws sit in recessed cupped washers. It's very cleanly machined

4. The style might be quite generic, but this Jazzmaster-type vibrato is functional and well set up with quite a soft feel. With strings stretched, tuning stability is excellent

There's a very purposeful feel here. The Ventura comes across as more stage guitar than sofa noodler, hanging well on a strap

Like the body, the neck craft is crisp. It's quarter-sawn maple, although, says Mark, "generally we go for half-quarter [rift sawn] rather than slab sawn, which we tend to avoid". The fretwork is good and those stylish edge markers, from ebony, are very cleanly installed. The six-in-a-line headstock isn't going to bother Fender and actually reminds us more of the sleeker, more modernistic style of Yamaha's Pacifica.

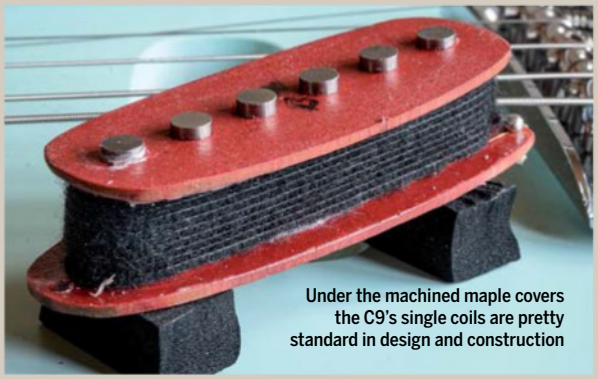
UNDER THE HOOD

A simple drive with some unique pickups

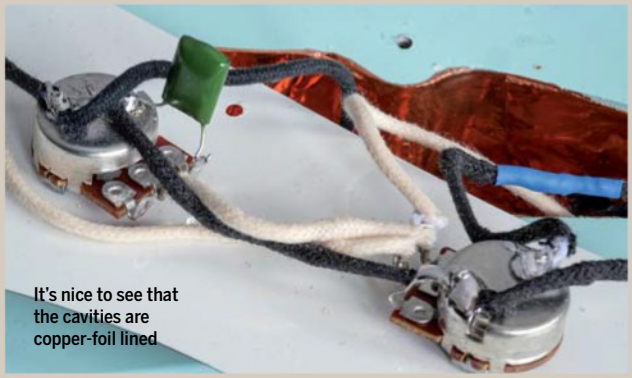
There's no doubt it's the in-house made C9 single coils here that give the Ventura, and indeed the other C9 models, a unique spin. "We use a wide but not overly wide coil with Alnico V rod magnets wound to around 7k or just under," says Mark Lamaq, who winds the pickups himself. "We also vacuum wax them. We can't bring that boutique feel in on the hardware, as discussed, but we knew if we put standard humbuckers on the Ventura, for example, we'd lose something, so we went style over form. Basically, they're a simple classic design that are a bit taller and a bit wider in terms of the coil."

Their construction looks tidy enough, rather like the carefully machined wooden covers. As to actual DCRs, our pickups measured 6.89kohms at the bridge and 6.52k at the neck and, although they're single coils, they're hum-cancelling when both are on.

With the control circuit, simple is best. The volume and tone are mini-pots rated at 250k, the volume is audio taper (A), the tone linear (B) with a standard (473J) .047µF green Mylar cap. If using your volume control is central to your style, then adding a simple treble bleed would cost you pence and take minutes with a soldering iron. The cavities also use copper foil and all the hook-up wire is vintage-style cloth-covered. It's almost boutique!



Under the machined maple covers the C9's single coils are pretty standard in design and construction



It's nice to see that the cavities are copper-foil lined

The two separate scratchplates certainly add to the Ventura's clean, crisp look – as well as seeming to reference Dennis Fano's Korean-made Rivolta Mondata – but they're made of Traffolyte, a layered phenolic resin (also known as Formica) and often used for engraved key fobs and machine labels.

Feel & Sounds

There's a very purposeful feel here. The Ventura comes across as more of a stage guitar than a sofa noodler. It hangs well on a strap with the neck pulled out a little further to your left-hand side – as you find with a Jazzmaster. Acoustically, we get that typical Jazzmaster resonance created by the 'dead' string length behind the bridge, which is set quite low to the body. Fitting a neck shim to raise the height of the bridge and increase that back angle would be an improvement for players with a heavier right-hand. Either way, like any Jazzmaster-style vibrato, these are common and easy enough adjustments. As is, there's nothing wrong with the playability.

The neck is pretty Fender-y in width although the fingerboard radius is flatter at 305mm (12 inches) and the medium wide and low frets (approximately 2.55mm wide by 1mm high) create a very clean and classic playing feel. We might suggest slightly rolling the fingerboard edges a little more,

There are no tricks with the controls, just a standard volume and tone with a three-way toggle pickup selector

not least if you wrap your thumb around the bass strings. Depth-wise, they're pretty slim, though not in the shred category, and this depth remains pretty constant along its length: approximately 21.6mm at both the 1st and 12th frets.

We're not entirely sure what to expect in terms of sound from the in-house single coils, but we're met with a combination of heat and clarity with a choppy percussive attack as if we'd bundled together a Jazzmaster and a Telecaster. As supplied, the pickup voicings are a little contrasted; the big full-voiced neck is a little dominant compared with the obviously brighter, thinner bridge voice. While some might prefer a little more kick at bridge, this slight mismatch actually sounds more like a classic Tele Custom (with its Wide Range humbucker at the neck and a classic single coil at the bridge); the pickup mix is really good with depth, bounce and excellent clarity. The top string response is also a little soft, but a couple of minutes with a screwdriver balanced the outputs a little more. Not only that, adding a little more tilt (with the treble sides closer to the strings than the bass) improves the string-to-string balance. It actually proves to be quite a compelling piece, covering big Jazzmaster-like cleans with quite a soulful voice at the neck, and crisp and slightly gritty surf leads at the bridge. That said, plug into a nastier, crunchy Marshall and there's a very characterful, punky honk at the bridge, which certainly pokes through a denser rock mix. And if you're into your pedals, this Ventura won't be offended.

Verdict

It's early days for C9, but for the right player this Ventura is a little gem. It's far from a radical design and yet it's the crisp uncluttered build with its simple drive that's the appeal, paired with original-looking but pretty classic-sounding 'hot' single coils. These uniquely shaped pickups do mean retrofits are a no-go, and if we were C9 we'd be considering some aftermarket alternatives in terms of voicing and power. Hardware and electronics upgrades, on the other hand, are easy to facilitate.

The 'affordable' British-made guitar is not a unique proposition, of course; Gordon Smith's Gatsby is in the same offset ballpark, as are makers such as Elliott Trent. But for us, the customers and players, more choices are always welcome, especially when they're as cleanly made as this. And along with this bolt-on model, we can expect some set-neck designs later this year. A promising debut!

C9 CUSTOM GUITARS VENTURA STANDARD

PRICE: £995 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Double-cutaway offset solidbody electric
BODY: FSC-certified grandis
NECK: Maple, slim 'C' profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/42.72mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple, ebony edge markers, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium
HARDWARE: Offset-style top mounting vibrato with separate 6-saddle bridge; Wilkinson EZ-Lok die-cast tuners – chrome-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54.5mm
ELECTRICS: 2x C9 Alnico V hot wound single coils (in black-stained maple covers), 3-way toggle pickup selector, master volume and tone controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.89/8.56
OPTIONS: Watch this space! The Ventura will also be available with tune-o-matic and stud tailpiece and/or Duesenberg Les Trem II (£POA)
RANGE OPTIONS: C9 offers the double-cut Diamond (from £1,095) with 3x single coils and a Bigsby-style vibrato and the more single-cut offset California (from £1,195) with 3x single coils and a hardtail or vibrato. Bass versions are available, too
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, to order
FINISHES: Peppermint (as reviewed) from range of pastel colours – all satin

C9 Custom Guitars
www.c9guitars.com

8/10

PROS Vibey, simple-but-classy build; thin finish; good neck feel and playability; in-tune vibrato; characterful sounds from the unique-looking single-coil pickups

CONS As you'd expect with a production prototype, there are a few details to be ironed out such as the mismatched truss rod cover; the stylish pickups can't be swapped without some irreversible modification

MF-484H 2.N

IT'S STILL A MOTHERF*CK!R.....

ALL VALVE AMP

Rated at 30-Watts, the MF484 2.N. provides loads of headroom for great sparkling clean tones, while the switchable boost adds enough growl for the heaviest of rockers. Bass, Middle, Treble and a presence rotary controls allow you to shape the tone to your liking. Volume & Gain controls give you plenty of control for overall output volume. There are two instrument inputs, UK has a more compressed and tight classic British tone. The US input has greater headroom producing a cleaner tone.

VALVES USED:
PRE - 1 x ECC81 - 1 X ECC82 - 2 x ECC83
POWER - 4 X EL84

ON-BOARD TWO NOTES TORPEDO

With the built in Two Notes Torpedo you can choose IR cabinet emulators modelled on 6 well known speaker cabinets. It's also a load box so there's no need to connect the valve head to a cabinet in the studio or at home.

ASHDOWNMUSIC.COM

SOLDANO SUPER LEAD OVERDRIVE PEDAL
£229

WHAT IS IT? Drive pedal designed to deliver the signature sound of Soldano's high-gain SLO-100 amp

1

2

3

SLO Motion

You can now get the legendary high-gain sounds of Soldano's Super Lead amplifier at your feet

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Olly Curtis

1. The side-mounted Deep push switch is designed to add low-end punch
2. These three knobs mimic the three-band EQ of the original 100-watt valve amp. Adjusting each clockwise will increase the output of the relative frequency ranges
3. The white finish mirrors the look of the original amp, as do the knobs – and yep, they go to 11

Since its introduction in 1987, the Soldano Super Lead Overdrive 100-watt valve head has been the choice of a number of well-known players – plenty of them in the metal and hard-rock field, including Eddie Van Halen, but also the likes of Eric Clapton and Mark Knopfler. Currently, you'd be looking at paying almost four grand for a new 100-watt head and a few hundred less for the 30-watt version. But if you want some Soldano in your rig at a more amenable price, there's now the option with this new SLO pedal, which puts the company's signature sound on your pedalboard.

Soldano says that the pedal uses the same cascading gain stages as its flagship amplifier. It also has the same control layout as one of the amp's channels with Volume and Gain knobs and some tonal tweaking courtesy of Presence, Treble, Middle and Bass controls. On top of these, there's a Deep button on the side of the casing that gives you two options for the nature of the bottom-end: push it in and you get a real increase of robust low-end heft to bolster the sound with more of a 4x12 cab vibe.

Starting with the Gain knob at zero and placing the Volume knob anywhere above midway, you can dial in practical amounts of boost with a sound that's just beyond clean with a nicely broken-up edge to it. Further movement of the Gain knob brings you into some classic crunch sounds.

The three-band EQ supplied by the lower set of knobs provides some very effective tonal shading, but it's the Presence knob that offers the most influence here, adding a real crispness and prominence to the top-end as you turn it up. Turning the Gain knob beyond the crunch sounds brings you right into the same territory as the amp's Drive channel, recreating its fat, saturated lead tones with ease. It's all brilliantly responsive to your touch, too – it *feels* right as well as sounding as you'd hope.

Verdict

Anyone looking for a responsive pedal for quality higher gain, harmonically rich overdrive and distortion sounds will find it here. While we didn't have a SLO amp to compare it to directly, we have little doubt that the pedal can give you a real taste of that Soldano flavour, so it's a great option for anyone who's ever desired the amp but found it to be outside their budget.

SOLDANO SUPER LEAD OVERDRIVE PEDAL

PRICE: £229
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Drive pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Volume, Presence, Gain, Treble, Middle, Bass, Deep switch, Bypass footswitch,
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 32mA
DIMENSIONS: 66 (w) x 113 (d) x 53mm (h)

Andertons
01483 456 777
www.soldano.com

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Soldano sound in a pedal; great touch sensitivity; compact size; nuanced EQ options

CONS Nothing!

THE RIVALS

There aren't really a lot of pedals that specifically target the Soldano sound. Wampler's SLOstortion was one but is no longer produced, while the AMT Electronics S2 (€152 plus VAT and taxes) is a two-channel preamp/distortion pedal designed to offer the sound of a five-stage preamp as found in a Soldano. There are, though, plenty of high-gain drive/distortion pedals that will do a similar job to the SLO pedal. The Keeley Filaments (£199) features three stacked gain stages and plenty of tone-shaping capability, and there's the Friedman BE-OD Distortion (£199), which offers Brit high-gain sound reminiscent of a Marshall JCM800.

Keeley's Filaments pedal recreates the tone of high-gain valve amps

ELECTRO-HARMONIX J MASCIS RAM'S HEAD BIG MUFF PI
£129

WHAT IS IT? Signature fuzz/distortion pedal from the Dinosaur Jr guitarist

Dino Stomp

Dinosaur Jr's J Mascis gets his own signature Big Muff based around the '73 'Violet' Ram's Head circuitry

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

1. The white and violet finish is smart, and includes J Mascis' squiggle in black, too
2. Like all Big Muffs, the Tone knob covers a really wide range from smooth and rounded to ear-shreddingly bright
3. According to the man himself, to get the J Mascis live sound turn Volume and Sustain up full with Tone just a little beyond midway

If anybody was going to have a signature Big Muff pedal it would be J Mascis. The Dinosaur Jr guitarist is well known for the use of the iconic pedals and has quite a collection of vintage examples as featured in the 2007 documentary *Fuzz: The Sound That Revolutionized The World*. Of course, there are many different variants of Big Muff out there on which to base a signature model, but J's preference is for the early to mid-1970s version two Muff that is known as the Ram's Head because of the odd little face on the front. This new model is a looker with a fresh white-and-violet paint job and the guitarist's signature, but underneath the hood it's actually the same as the silver-coloured nano-sized Ram's Head Big Muff Pi that appeared in 2019 based on the 'Violet' version of the circuitry.

The team at Electro-Harmonix spent time voicing the reissue Ram's Head Big Muff Pi against some original 70s versions and they got it pretty much spot-on. It's unlikely that any two vintage pedals will ever sound identical over time, but this one successfully captures the essence of a pedal from the original Ram's Head period. There's a balanced sound across the frequency range: the bottom-end is tight and controlled, there's a bit of a scoop in the midrange, and the articulate top-end offers really good note definition.

Beyond that, though, it is typical Big Muff sound with a range from a medium-gain overdrive through to full saturated fuzz. The Sustain knob does not lie: there is masses of it fully clockwise (that's exactly where J Mascis likes to set his) and it's all delivered via a Tone knob that allows plenty of scope for finding your own sweet spot between its extremes of full, smooth fatness and raucous strident treble.

Verdict

While the others in the nano-sized Big Muff reissue range (V1 Triangle Muff, Op-Amp Big Muff and Green Russian) each have their distinct character, the Ram's Head arguably has the appeal to attract more players. This special edition is obviously a big draw for J Mascis fans, and indeed anyone interested in paying a bit extra for a better-looking pedal – and perhaps a better investment in the long-term – than the standard edition. If you want a brand-new Ram's Head Big Muff Pi, you now have a choice. G

ELECTRO-HARMONIX
J MASCIS RAM'S HEAD BIG MUFF PI

PRICE: £129
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Fuzz/distortion/sustain pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Volume, Sustain, Tone, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V battery or 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 2mA
DIMENSIONS: 68 (w) x 111 (d) x 50mm (h)

Electro-Harmonix
www.ehx.com

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Classic Ram's Head tone; compact size; nice paint job

CONS UK price differential over the standard model (the difference is only $17 in the USA)

THE RIVALS

This is not the only J Mascis Big Muff-style effect, although the other versions are more boutique offerings. The Wren And Cuff J Mascis Garbage Face (£365) is a "part-by-part recreation of J's number one Muff since 1987", with the circuitry reflecting all of the component values that have drifted over the years. It also features footswitchable volume options and germanium transistor treble boost, plus there's also a Garbage Face Jr (£239) without those. The Stomp Under Foot Amherst '76 Rams Head (£164) is an exact copy of J's 1976 Ram's Head. Of course, there's always EHX's standard silver and red Ram's Head version (£99).

Wren And Cuff's Garbage Face recreates Mascis' long-time Muff

PHOTO COURTESY OF WREN AND CUFF

the Wishlist

Dream gear to beg, borrow and steal for...

Gibson Custom BB King 'Live At The Regal' ES-335 £8,799

CONTACT **Gibson** WEB **www.gibson.com** WORDS **Neville Marten** PHOTOGRAPHY **Neil Godwin**

BB King's 1965 album *Live At The Regal* is a landmark in so many respects. Even though by this time blues artists such as Etta James, John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters and others had released live albums, BB's masterpiece would cross over to young audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, desperate for music brimming with both gravitas and history.

King's playing on that album would influence Peter Green, Robben Ford and even John Lennon. Asked if there was anything he still wished for, the Beatle replied, "Yeah, to play guitar like BB King." Well, listen to John's solos on *Get Back* and the link is there for all to hear.

The Gibson that BB played on that legendary gig was a 1959 ES-335, custom-ordered by King and spec'd to include an Argentine Grey finish (a kind of washed-out Tobacco Sunburst), Bigsby vibrato and Varitone switch. King had previously tried all types of guitar, from acoustics and Gibson archtops to Fender's Esquire. But it was this instrument that turned him onto the thinline semis he would play for the rest of his life.

The specs are (almost) exactly what you'd expect: three-ply maple and poplar laminated body with solid maple centre block, mahogany neck, single cream binding, twin humbucking pickups (unpotted Custombuckers), and the long pickguard. Other features include a dotted Indian rosewood fingerboard and aged nickel hardware, including a reissue Bigsby B7, springless tune-o-matic bridge and Kluson-style Grover 'Milk Bottle' Rotomatic tuners.

What separates this guitar from other ES-335s is its mono Varitone switch. Essentially a six-way notch filter, in position 1 it's bypassed so the signal to your amp is like a regular ES-335, but from there through position 6 it scoops out certain frequencies to provide tonal presets that sound anywhere from nasal to thin. BB was a big fan of 'honky' position 2 (perhaps why Peter Green left his mis-wired Les Paul as it was?).

The Regal's medium C profile neck, 42.85mm nut width and 22 frets on a 304mm (12-inch) radius neck mean it's a joy to play. Sonically, it's exactly what you would expect with position 1 of the Varitone providing the usual ES-335 experience of warm, fat or incisive tones that fit virtually any style or genre. There'll likely be Varitone sounds here that you love and others that you don't. If so, simply stay away from them.

Yes, it costs an arm, a leg, and your granny, too. But what a slice of music history it is, all wrapped up in a single package (well, actually a limited run of 100)!

1. The six-way Varitone is a 'love it or hate it' thing, but it provides some sounds that are very usable: position 1 is regular ES-335 anyway, and BB loved position 2. Beneath the True Historic gold 'top hat' knobs sit 500kohm CTS pots, paper-in-oil capacitors and, of course, the complex Varitone workings with six separate capacitors

2. The Live At The Regal ES-335's neck is a regular, medium C profile 1959 style, still one of the most comfortable players ever. With its 19th-fret join to the body and those double cutaways, access is phenomenally good. Medium gauge frets, a 304mm (12-inch) radius fingerboard and 624mm (24.6-inch) scale length mean the strings are like butter under the fingers

4. The aged nickel-covered Custombuckers are (like the PAFs that would have been on BB's guitar) unpotted, producing a slightly more 'open' sound than the encased variety. Note the long pickguard: were these modified ES-175 'guards until Gibson got the more 'correct' shorter version into production? Also check out the pearl discs that mask the missing stopbar's holes

5. Certain guitar aficionados (including the super-knowledgeable Mike Lewis of Fender and Guild) maintain that a Bigsby on a hollow or semi-hollow guitar really makes it sing. The long B7 as fitted here also looks fantastic, and used with discretion can bring a whole host of subtle and not so subtle effects to your sound

6. Although it vies with others as the first thinline semi-acoustic guitar, Ted McCarty's ES-300 series set the standard that all others strive to equal. The ES-335's single cream binding became more flashy on the higher-end ES-345, and super luxurious on the 'Custom'-styled ES-355. The Argentine Grey nitro lacquer is hand aged by the Murphy Lab

Gas Supply

Our pick of the month's most delectable and wallet-bothering new gear

Taylor American Dream Sunburst Trio From £2,039

CONTACT: **Taylor Guitars** PHONE: **00800 23750011** WEB: **www.taylorguitars.com**

JARGON CRUNCHING

C-Class Bracing

Taylor's V-Class bracing set a new standard for acoustic internals upon its launch. However, the C-Class bracing pattern (pictured above right) is designed specifically to boost low-end response thanks to an "asymmetrical, cantilevered design", says Taylor, which gives the C-Class its name.

The American Dream series already exists doesn't it? What's going on here?

Correct. Taylor launched the American Dream Series during that virus-enforced period of downtime we all experienced, which, perhaps incredibly, was three years ago now. As you may recall, the American Dream Series name tips its hat to the guitar shop where Taylor first birthed its acoustic guitars, and the series represents a delivery of the Taylor features we all want but at a price point more in line with "working musician" budgets. That'll be US-made, solid woods and the all-important V-Class bracing. Here, Taylor has unveiled a trio of guitars to join the existing AD17, 22 and 27 guitars, and the first thing you'll notice is that they're all finished in sunburst.

Are these just sunburst versions, then?

No, there's a bit more to it than that. The latest models are the AD11e-SB (£2,039), AD12 e-SB and AD17e-SB (both £2,159), with the AD11e-SB bringing Taylor's newest scaled-down body shape, the Grand Theater, to the American Dream line-up. As well as the reduced size and accompanying shorter scale, the AD11e also makes use of Taylor's C-Class bracing, which is directly derived from its flagship V-Class design.

What about the other two?

The AD12e-SB isn't the first Grand Concert shape in the American Dream Series, but it *is* the first Grand Concert shape in the range to feature a spruce top (read

BODY STYLES

The new American Dream sunburst models are offered in three body shapes (pictured left to right): Grand Theater (AD11e-SB), Grand Concert (AD12e-SB) and Grand Pacific (AD17e-SB)

AMERICAN-MADE

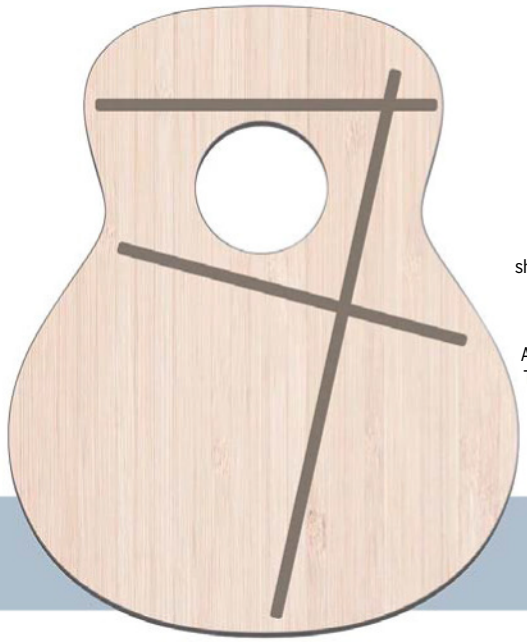
Taylor's American Dream Series was launched in 2020 when lockdowns forced the brand to "invent its way out of a mess" in order to continue supplying more accessible versions of its US-made guitars

SOLID TONEWOODS

An important part of the American Dream design is the inclusion of solid tonewoods. Here, we get Sitka spruce, solid walnut, mahogany and eucalyptus

ELECTRONICS

All three of the latest models include Taylor's much-loved Expression System 2 pickup and preamp system



The Grand Theater shape makes its first appearance in the American Dream Series with the AD11e-SB, featuring Taylor's proprietary C-Class bracing

our full review on page 92). The AD17e-SB, meanwhile, essentially follows the same design as the American Dream Blacktop models, except in this case it comes in that nice-looking sunburst finish.

That's the body sizes explained. What are they made of?

Remember earlier when we said Taylor's mission with the American Dream Series was to bring us the most affordable solid woods possible in a US-made guitar? All three of the new models feature solid Sitka spruce

All three of the new US-made American Dream models feature solid Sitka spruce tops, joined by solid walnut back and sides

tops, which are joined by solid walnut back and sides. The necks are made from "tropical" mahogany, while the fingerboards are eucalyptus. The latter has a rosewood-ish look to it – and given its sustainability and lower cost, might also help you breathe more easily.

So are these affordable Taylors?

That depends. As always, 'affordable' is something of a relative term. The sunburst finish means that this trio isn't the cheapest in the American Dream Series, but overall this range represents a significant saving over Taylor's other American-made, solid-wood guitars.

What's the deal with the sunburst?

Taylor calls the combo of the hand-finished Tobacco Sunburst and Firestripe pickguard "neo-vintage" and we see where the company's coming from. It's thin, matt and (at least to us) takes what could have been yet another slightly anaemic spruce face and gives these guitars some old-style mojo.

And the 'e' stands for electro?

Indeed. All three of the new American Dream models are fitted with Taylor's Expression System 2 behind-the-saddle electronics. The ES2 controls are shoulder-mounted, offering bass, treble and volume knobs. Each one comes with Taylor's AeroCase to match the body shape, too. **[SW]**

ALSO OUT NOW...

WALRUS AUDIO MELEE £305

Shoegazers, rejoice! Walrus Audio's latest concoction, the Melee, not only sees distortion and reverb combined but the whole lot can be manipulated via (you guessed it) an onboard foot-controllable joystick. Described as a Wall Of Noise, there are three reverb algorithms (Ambient, Octave-Down and Reverse) and the reverb/distortion chain order can be switched. Meanwhile, we also get toggle switches for the reverb's tone and decay, plus a master output control. The joystick works as an X/Y controller for mixing the effects and controlling the distortion levels respectively. We'll have a review shortly!
www.walrusaudio.com

KORG NU:TEKT £199

If the thought of building your own pedals appeals but using an iron leaves you looking for some solder to cry on, Korg's latest Nu:Tekt pedals are for you. Korg has created two DIY pedal kits: the HD-S Harmonic Distortion and TR-S Power Tube Reactor. Both are solderless and come with everything you need to build them, including the casing – and even the tools. The HD-S houses three distortion circuits that Korg says offer "never-before-heard harmonic distortion", while the TR-S uses Korg's Nutube technology to deliver full-blown amp-like valve overdrive.
www.korg.co.uk

Fretbuzz

A monthly look at must-hear artists from all corners of the guitar world, from the roots of their sound to the tracks that matter most

Artist: AA Williams

Album: As The Moon Rests (Bella Union)

The recording techniques used on AA Williams' second album, *As The Moon Rests*, allowed her to explore vast soundscapes
www.aawilliamsmusic.com

AA Williams' none-more-black Gothic Explorer is a 2001 model that has become her "ride or die"

London singer-songwriter AA Williams followed up the beautiful melancholy of gothic debut *Forever Blue* with *As The Moon Rests* last year, a journey further into post-rock stylings. A talented multi-instrumentalist, Williams found the guitar a little down the line. "I'd always listened to a lot of guitar-based music but hadn't felt the compulsion to play any of it," Williams tells us. "Years after studying piano and cello, someone a few doors down from me was throwing out this Squier Tele. It had a little sign under the strings saying, 'Please take me, just needs work.'"

Change Your Tune

Although she had no prior experience of playing guitar, Williams' classical training gave her a solid starting point on her six-string journey. "My pal was a guitar tech, so we went to Denmark Street and bought new pickups, new tuners, new everything. Being a cellist, I'm used to 5ths, so I stuck it in DADGAD, thinking it's a bit closer to start with, and started writing a few songs to get to know it a bit better. I have never learned to play in standard, although I know that's highly illegal..." she laughs. "It's mostly all in DADGAD; I have a baritone that is tuned to the same intervals but lower, so AEADEA, and one in CGCFGC."

PHOTO BY JEZ PENNINGTON

American Gothic

Williams' original Squier remains dear to her, but she hasn't been able to escape the inevitable thirst for more gear. "My main instrument is a 2001 Gibson Gothic Explorer and it's just my ride or die, it's incredible," she gushes. "I got it on eBay; I saw it there and just thought I couldn't not own it. It's beautiful. I've had it for about three years now and it's the one. The weight is perfect for me. I'm fairly tall and broad, and it balances so well. At some point in its history somebody changed the pickups to an EMG 57/66 set and it's a wonderful-sounding thing. I also use a Fender [Made In Japan] Jaguar baritone – and you try to get a backup for that! A friend of mine has one and will not sell it, no matter what."

Strings To Her Bow

As a cellist originally and learning guitar in non-standard tuning, Williams has developed a playing style of her own. "I haven't learned in any proper capacity," she explains. "I didn't have lessons or learn other people's tabs or anything. I think there's a punk-rock quality in that I didn't have a clue what I was doing when I started; I was just hacking at it and trying to find the sounds in my head. So there's a lot of rhythm, and when it's live I'm the rhythm person. I do all of the tremolo melody stuff on record and it's great, but trying to do it and sing isn't easy, so that all goes to my other guitar player."

Wide Screen Sounds

Williams' lockdown project, a collection of covers entitled *Songs From Isolation* and released in 2021, was an exercise in minimalism, with her performing interpretations of fan-requested songs solo on guitar and piano, with just some subtle loops. Her new album, *As The Moon Rests*, goes bigger, broadening her palette. "There's a lot happening there," she grins. "I had a lot of time, so I spent longer on demos, getting them as close to what I wanted as possible. And in the studio we could spend time working with guitars, using three or four per song if it was needed – mess around with amp sounds, split signals... Having the luxury to be able to make it sound as substantial as possible, while keeping subtlety, was great." **[GK]**

Standout track: *For Nothing*
For fans of: PJ Harvey, Nick Cave, Marissa Nadler, Low

RIGHT ANGULAR

AA Williams is drawn to the sleek lines of Gibson's Explorer and Flying V

Since purchasing her prized Gibson Gothic Explorer, AA Williams has found herself in a rather desirable situation with regard to instruments. "I recently got a Gibson endorsement, which is very awesome," she says. "I borrowed a few bits and pieces for the last tour. I had a gorgeous little SG, which I took with me, but I'm hoping they lend me a V – switching between a V and an Explorer would make me very happy." How about a signature model? "Oh, wow... Honestly, I'm crossing everything that someone will think that's a good idea because I certainly do!"

THE LINEUP

Albums

The month's best guitar music – a hand-picked selection of the finest fretwork on wax

JoBo takes blues-rock to Red Rocks with his latest live release

PHOTO BY JENISE JENSEN

Joe Bonamassa

Tales Of Time

J&R Adventures/Provogue (release date: 14 April)

10/10

JoBo steps out in style to perform his latest studio release live on stage at Red Rocks, Colorado

It would be fair to say Joe Bonamassa's career has been well documented since exploding into the public consciousness over a decade ago. And *Tales Of Time* extends things further. This live release is essentially his last studio album, *Time Clocks*, performed in full at Red Rocks Amphitheatre, Colorado, in August 2022. Naturally, it's also available as a DVD and Blu-ray, plus all the regular audio-only formats.

If you're a fan, you'll know exactly what to expect – consummate blues-rock guitar performed with a band rehearsed to a standard of military precision. "This live show represents our most progressive and largest production to date, focusing on my most ambitious studio album to date," Joe enthuses. "The iconic Kevin Shirley once again has produced both wonderful music and a wonderful visual. My band was a force of nature on this show and it truly was a special night." We couldn't agree more.

The excitement of the live performance comes across from the audio alone, the DVD turbo-charging the experience with extra tracks taken from Joe's extensive repertoire thrown in for the die-hard fans. Needless to say, the playing is flawless throughout and tracks such as *The Heart That Never Waits* provide show-stopping moments early on in the set, leaving you wondering how the band can possibly build on it. But they manage it. Even fairly laid-back tracks such as *Mind's Eye* manage to rock your world. Great playing, vintage guitars, semi-precious amps... what more do you need? **[DM]**

Standout track: *Just 'Cos You Can Don't Mean You Should*
For fans of: Gary Moore, Eric Clapton, Albert King

Jared James Nichols

Jared James Nichols

Black Hill Records (release date: 24 March)

8/10

Album number three from incendiary rocker

Jared's third studio album demonstrates that the US musician has a particular skill when it comes to blending rock with elements of the blues. With 12 tracks, it's a strong showcase for his songwriting, vocal and guitar talents. Opener, *Bad Roots*, is a pounding rocker with a super-thick guitar riff and searing solo, while *Down The Drain* has a Soundgarden meets The Beatles vibe to it with dynamic vocals and precise riffing. The swing on *Good Time Girl* and the wah-infused riff is a strong change of pace, and then *Hallelujah* marries Black Sabbath heaviness with an up-tempo triplet feel. The blues-infused solo on the rock 'n' rolling *My Delusion* combines great elements of Joe Bonamassa and Zakk Wylde, while the bohemian 60s vibe of *Out Of Time* is a touching track that's dedicated to Jared's late father. This really is a grand listen. **[JS]**

Standout track: *My Delusion*
For fans of: Zakk Wylde, Gary Moore

Steve Vai

Vai/Gash

Favoured Nations (available now)

9/10

Vai in retro mode for rock-solid release

Over the years we've come to expect the unexpected from Steve Vai, certainly following his mind-blowing progressive album, *Inviolate*, from last year. And with *Vai/Gash*, he pretty much doubles back on himself as this eight-song album evokes his David Lee Roth *Eat 'Em And Smile* days. Thick multi-tracked guitars, singalong choruses and rousing rock solos: it's a homage to classic rock that sees him play all instruments with Gash, a biker Steve knew years ago, on vocals. The backstory is that this album was recorded in '91, around the time of *Sex & Religion* with Vai's desire to make music akin to 70s rock. It certainly does that. Opener, *In The Wind*, is a big anthem groover that courts good-time rock, AC/DC meets Van Halen style. *Busted* is an up-tempo boogie (think ZZ Top meets Van Halen) with a corker of a chorus. *Let's Jam* is an E-based rocker, stoked with a great riff and a finger-frying solo. You'll want to check this one out. **[JS]**

Standout track: *Busted*
For fans of: David Lee Roth, Van Halen

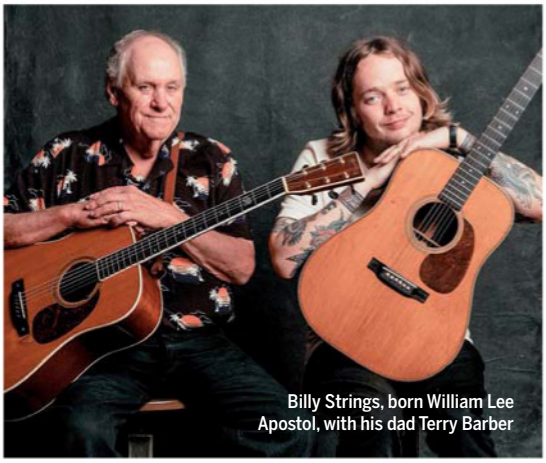


PHOTO BY JOSHUA BLACK WILKINS

Billy Strings, born William Lee Apostol, with his dad Terry Barber

Billy Strings
Me/And/Dad
Rounder (available now)

9/10

Superb multi-generational bluegrass deft pickin'

With *Me/And/Dad*, 30-year-old guitarist and singer Billy Strings managed to find time away from his touring to record 22 songs with – you guessed it – his dad, Terry Barber. And of these tracks, 14 bluegrass and country classics were settled on. Strings is one hell of a musician in the acoustic, bluegrass and country vein. The blend is a result of honed craftsmanship from countless hours playing together with his father. Joined by bass, mandolin, banjo and fiddle (Jerry Douglas makes a guest appearance, too), Strings really is a joy to hear – his chord picking and lead lines are super precise and richly articulated. As for the songs, they range from traditional bluegrass (*Long Journey Home*, *Frosty Morn*) through to Doc Watson's *Way Downtown* and Lester Flatt/Bill Monroe's *Little Cabin Home On The Hill*. American acoustic music doesn't come much better than this. **[JS]**

Standout track: *Way Downtown*
For fans of: Molly Tuttle, Punch Brothers

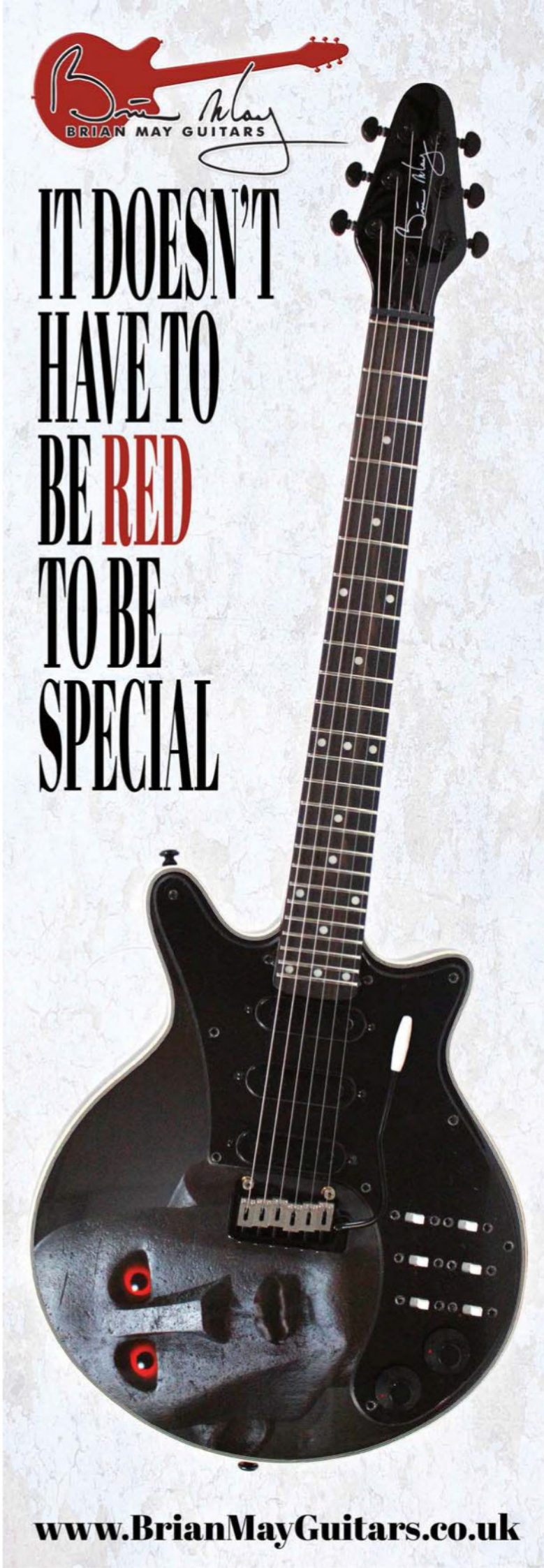
Ralph Towner
At First Light
ECM (release date: 17 March)

9/10

Beautiful nylon-string stylings from jazz maestro

Ralph Towner is one of those artists who defies pigeonholing. Although his music shelters under the umbrella-term 'jazz', there really is so much more to it than that. At times it veers towards modern classical music, compositionally speaking, and at others it pursues the mainstream with interpretations of Great American Songbook standards. "My solo recordings have always included my own compositions in which there are trace elements of the many composers and musicians that have attracted me," he says in the liner notes of *At First Light*. He goes on to cite some diverse influences such as sax legend John Coltrane and Renaissance composer John Dowland. It's in tracks such as *Ubi Sunt* that it's possible to hear the coming together of these influences. Classically flavoured solo nylon-string impeccably performed, the whole album is a joy to behold. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Fat Foot*
For fans of: John Abercrombie, Antonio Forcione



THE LINEUP

Tones Behind The Tracks

Blazing instrumentalist **Vinnie Moore** found himself inspired to include vocals on a solo project for the first time with his latest album

Artist: Vinnie Moore

Album: Double Exposure (Mind's Eye Music)

Double Exposure was recorded remotely during the period of imposed lockdown across the world

Another album that was conceived and recorded while we were all confined to quarters during lockdown, *Double Exposure* came to life when Vinnie Moore found himself in the situation now commonplace for music produced back then. "The drums were recorded in Huntington, New York, on Long Island," he begins, "and all the guitars were recorded right here in my studio. I played some bass on the record, so that was done here, too. My friend John Cassidy played some keyboards and he did that at his studio, and the guest bassists also did their stuff at their studios."

This is a very 'present day' recording scenario. Did you find that a comfortable way of working, as opposed to previous albums where you've recorded with everyone in a single studio?

"For the last record, *Soul Shifter*, I was there playing with Richie [Monica] when he was tracking drums and, yeah, it was great to play together. This time, he just played with my demos and then I played to what he recorded. So, retrospectively, I don't really hear much of a difference; whether I was in the room playing with him or whether I was in my studio playing with his recorded tracks, [it] felt the same to me.

"I know there's something to be said for going in and doing it the way Van Halen did where they're all playing live together. I kind of always wanted to do that. On *Mind's Eye* [1986], I played with Tommy Aldridge and Andy West, we were all playing as a band. But then we would go back and fix the parts that needed fixing. And *Meltdown* [1991] was the same way, actually. I played with Joe Franco [on drums] with Greg Smith on bass and I'm not seeing a huge difference."

Vinnie found a new love in an Epiphone SG while recording *Double Exposure*: "How could I have not known about this guitar for so many years?"

PHOTO © GRETCHEN JOHNSON PHOTOGRAPHY

What were your goals with this album?

"When I started out it was just meant to be an instrumental record with six songs. It was during the Covid lockdowns and I didn't know how much time I had – you know, nobody knew how long that time period was gonna last. So I thought, 'Okay, let me work on these six songs and just put out an EP.' I wanted to stay creative, stay active, put something out there.

"I started listening to my songs to get ideas and one day I started hearing vocals in my head, and I started singing along with it. So I kept that in mind and I continued listening to the songs and it kind of hit me that all of them could be vocal songs. I got this bit of inspiration where I wanted to do them as vocal songs, but then I thought I'm really happy with the instrumental versions, too, so I wanted to do both. I was like, okay, whatever, it was something different that nobody's done before. So what if it's quirky or a little odd? Just go with it."

What was your approach to using dynamics in your playing on the album?

"I like contrast a lot. I don't like 'soft' the whole song or 'loud' the whole song. I think different volumes and weaving things adds a lot more feel and there's a vibe to it. Then, when you kick in again, it's more powerful. Technically, on the guitar, I use the volume control a lot on stage and when I'm recording. Jeff Beck always did that a lot where the volume is full up and he's getting a certain sound, then he'd turn it down to 4 or 5 [on the guitar's volume control] and play another lick, and it has a totally different feeling. And that's kind of what I've naturally gravitated to.

"Without even thinking about it, my small finger is constantly on the volume control, making changes

PHOTO © GRETCHEN JOHNSON PHOTOGRAPHY

during the course of a song or a solo. Also, of course, switching pickups: with the bridge pickup to the neck pickup there's a lot of dynamics and contrast, you can get two different styles, different volume levels."

Are there any signature techniques that you favour and feel define your style?

"I think I've got a left-hand legato side, at times, that comes out, so it's more of a flowing thing. Then I have a picking thing that I shift into sometimes that's probably my Al Di Meola influence. And sometimes it's mixing those two things. It's hard to analyse what I do. I'm so close to it, but I just try to mix things up and add contrast, so it's not all the same thing."

Which guitars, amps and pedals did you use on the album?

"I used probably half a dozen different guitars. I used this Fender Stratocaster that Fender made for me back in the early 90s. It's a one-off custom-made guitar, and it's basically a Strat but the body is a little smaller. That has actually gotten a lot of usage over the years on records, but I've never taken it on the road. I used some Kramers on the record – a Baretta, something that Kramer made for me. And I used a couple of my old Dean signature models, a couple of Strats.

"I used an Epiphone SG here and there on the record, which is my new love. I mean, I've kind of fallen in love with the SG, like, how could I have not known about this guitar for so many years, you know? It just feels so good and has a great tone. I used it a lot with both pickups on, just using the volume controls so you can get a combination of the neck and the bridge pickups, and I got some interesting tones that way.

"I like contrast a lot. I think different volumes and weaving things adds a lot more feel. Then, when you kick in again, it's more powerful"

"Mostly the amp was my Marshall JMP 100-watt and I bought a 1965 Fender Super Reverb, and I use that on some stuff. I also bought a reissue Fender Deluxe Reverb, so I've been getting into a little bit of a Fender vibe lately. But it was mostly the Marshall with the guitar going through an Analog Man King Of Tone – very cool, smooth sounding. I also picked up a Fulltone Octafuzz because on one particular song I wanted to go for the higher octave like Jimi Hendrix; there's a switch where you can turn off the higher octave and just use the fuzz, and I fell in love with the fuzz sound. I bought it for only the higher octave, but then I got so many uses out of the fuzz on so many melodies and solos."

Are you all about valve amp tones or do you use modelling at all?

"A little bit. I got inspired by some of the sounds from the AmpliTube 5. It's so cool. I mean, guitar players finally have the advantage that keyboard players have always had, where they just go through presets and get inspired by a patch that they wouldn't have normally thought of creating and it inspires a musical idea or a song. It's a really cool thing." **[JD/DM]**

Vinnie Moore's new album, *Double Exposure*, is available now via Mind's Eye Music

www.vinniemoore.com

Vinnie's custom Kramer featured on the album, along with his new SG and a 90s custom Strat, while a Fulltone Octofuzz also found a surprising place in Vinne's recording setup

NEVILLE'S ADVOCATE

Brand Awareness

Neville Marten recalls moments when his gear, no matter how fantastic its pedigree, was not quite enough to impress certain onlookers

Some years ago Mick Taylor (of *That Pedal Show* fame) and I did a few gigs as an acoustic duo, and sometimes as a trio with our late lamented bassist friend Roger Newell. The three of us also had a decent pub rock band with another mate on drums. On one occasion it was just Mick and me playing our hotch-potch of numbers to a happy audience in a village pub near Bath. I had borrowed a Martin 000-18 from World Guitars, just to see if I got on with it and whether it worked in this context. It had a quality pickup fitted and, of course, it played and sounded great – but

"At the end of the evening two guys came over to chat and one said, 'I've got a guitar just like that one. 190 quid from Argos, wasn't it?'"

was hardly a killer in the looks department. Mick had a much more imposing looking Taylor (yes, Marten with a Martin and Taylor with a Taylor – how we laughed!). It was a 714ce in sunburst, with pretty fingerboard and headstock inlays and altogether a more striking-looking piece of kit.

Two middle-aged guys had watched us intently all night. At the end of the evening they came over to chat and enthuse over our performance. The quieter of the two finally piped up to me with, "I've got a guitar just like that one." "Oh yeah, nice," I responded. "190 quid from Argos, wasn't it?" His unintended sleight on my guitar was the *coup de grâce*. Next day I took the Martin back and bought a (cheaper but much more visually commanding) Gibson J-185, in sunburst, with double parallelogram fretboard inlays and Maltese crosses on the bridge.

On another occasion our four-piece was doing a gig at Epsom Racecourse. Mick was playing his Sonic Blue Strat, Roger had the '59 Precision bass that he'd used during his years with Rick Wakeman in the 1970s, and I had my exceptionally beautiful sunburst PRS Signature with abalone bird inlays and mad flaming. It surely couldn't fail to impress.

Come soundcheck, the engineer called for each of us to play something so he could set levels and so on: "Guy stage right, blue Strat, we'll have you first." As always, Mick sounded awesome through his Mesa Lone Star amp. "Great, now the black P-Bass, please, centre stage." Roger (otherwise known as 'World War Three') dutifully obliged. "Fantastic! Now the bloke stage left with... whatever that is." You can imagine how I felt – and I was going through my Matchless DC30, too! Oh, well. There you go.

Boogie Nights

Many years before any of the above transpired, another friend – who played with a massively successful female singer at the time – was also friends with Phil Palmer, a stunning player who you may have seen backing a certain Mr Clapton, or perhaps Mr Knopfler. It was 1980 and Phil had just returned from the States with three Mesa/Boogie combos and wanted to sell one of them. My mate told me and, having only just heard of this new amp brand and how it cascaded gain stages to produce hitherto impossible sounds, I jumped at the chance. It was £700 – a king's ransom back then. It was a mahogany Mark II with a cane wicker front and I couldn't have been more proud of it.

One night at a gig I was using my white SG Standard with Maestro Vibrola, directly into the front with only a Boss chorus and analogue delay for effects. The beautiful drive tones were coming from the SG's humbuckers and the Boogie's stunning circuitry and EV speaker. A guy I knew quite well as a busy local guitarist walked up to me at the end of the evening and proffered: "Great sound, Nev. Did you make the amp yourself?" Again, imagine my chagrin. But I shrugged it off and that amp became my gigging partner for 14 years, right up to my purchase of said green Matchless.

Have you got any moments when your musical pomposity was punctured by some unfortunate soul who cut your pride to the quick with a well intentioned but crushing comment? Go on, please share!

GAS OF THE MONTH

White Heat

What? Vintage VS6 Reissued, white
Where seen? pmtonline.co.uk **Price?** £369

Having mentioned my own white SG I thought I'd trawl around and see what's available, and discovered Vintage's VS6 in beautiful white, from PMT. Several other retailers also have it and they're all priced about the same. Vintage brand guitars punch way above their weight. Trev Wilkinson's involvement has always meant that they come with great hardware and fantastic-sounding pickups. And just look at that price. It's bonkers! With a mahogany body and neck, Wilkinson tune-o-matic bridge and stopbar tailpiece, plus a pair of Trev's MWVC humbuckers, it also features Grover tulip tuners and a 305mm (12-inch) radius bound rosewood fingerboard that offers total access to all 22 frets. It's a ton of guitar for the money, the online user reviews are rarely short of ecstatic, and if you fancy emulating the many greats who've used this style of guitar, then it would definitely do the trick.

REAL PLUGIN

LA-STUDIO

REAL TUBE HEAD | Two notes AUDIO ENGINEERING | SUPERGROUP DESIGN

Laney BLACK COUNTRY CUSTOMS HANDCRAFTED IN THE UK Two notes AUDIO ENGINEERING

CONFESSIONS OF A LUTHIER

Hold The Line

Alex Bishop takes extra special care to "measure twice and cut once" in the crucial task of neck joining

One frequent question I'm asked about guitar making is, "What is the hardest part about building a guitar?" It's normally preceded by, "How long does a guitar take to build?" (somewhere between 100 hours and one lifetime) and "Where do you get the wood from?" (well, this one was built from a chopped up dining table...). The truth is that the easy part of guitar making is actually making the guitar, and the hardest part is working out how you're going to go about it in the first place.

"This crucial junction is essentially the marriage between two components: the playable neck of the guitar and the tone-producing soundbox"

This is especially true when considering the join between the neck and the body of a guitar. Whether acoustic or electric, this crucial junction is essentially the marriage between two components: the playable neck of the instrument and the tone-producing soundbox, and there are several ways to do it. But should the neck join fail in its job of securing and aligning the neck, the guitar will suffer – sometimes disastrously – on both counts. A misaligned neck might not only result in an unplayably high or low action, but also a poor join will sap the energy driving the soundbox, compromising tone.

One of Alex's specially constructed jigs guides the router cutting the mortice in the guitar's body

PHOTO BY ALEX BISHOP

For the inexperienced luthier it may not be until the strings are tied on for the first time that this heartbreaking discovery is made, which is a tough problem to bounce back from so late in the game. This week I spent some time with a student designing and building the jigs (that's woodworking jargon for tools and templates) for such a job, and we took the opportunity to upgrade some of my own jigs in the process.

I prefer to use a traditional dovetail neck join on my guitars. This is a tapered protrusion at the bottom of the neck that wedges into a corresponding V-shaped hole on the body. The beauty of this join is its simplicity; as the neck is pushed into the body it is simultaneously pulled in against the body of the guitar as it wedges into place. A sparing application of glue is all that's needed to keep the join from separating from any future wood expansion or contraction.

We decided to make two separate jigs, one for the hole (or 'mortice') in the guitar body, and another for the dovetail (or 'tenon') of the neck. These devices have a carefully shaped template fixed to them that a router cutter can follow, cutting an exact replica of the desired shape. Our mortice jig was cut from a sheet of plywood with recesses cut in the top for screws, which allowed two blocks of wood to be adjusted to clamp the template against the top of the guitar body. A backstop was added to prevent the router from blowing out the back of the back *et voilà*: a few passes with a high-speed router and the job is done.

The Last Dance

The tenon jig is a more tricky affair, however. Most guitar necks tend to pitch back very slightly, often by only a degree or two. Therefore it is necessary to make a template that is hinged to a backboard to accommodate a range of potential angles. The jig must be very stable; any flexing of the template under the weight of the router affects the precision of the final cut, potentially ruining our careful work so far, so we allowed ourselves a bit of over-engineering. Eventually, we settled on a design that used a pair of locking bolts to keep everything held firmly in position, and with a nod of satisfaction we both donned the necessary PPE and flicked the power switch.

The trial run of any new jig is always a nerve-racking moment, as you submit months of painstaking effort and hundreds of pounds' worth of wood to the dispassionate power of a 22,000rpm carbide cutting machine. With the high-pitched shriek of the router subsiding, we released the guitar neck from its plywood cradle and cautiously slid it into position in the guitar body. Stepping back, we exchanged a mutual look of relief. The guitar-making gods were looking kindly on us... this time.

Marshall
Gain
Bass
Middle
Treble
Volume
DRIVE MASTER
Gain
Tone
Volume
BLUES BREAKER®
Gain
Bass
Contour
Treble
Volume
SHRED MASTER
GAIN
BASS
MIDDLE
TREBLE
LEVEL
Marshall
The Guv'nor
THE LEGENDS ARE BACK.
MARSHALL.COM/PEDALS

'Bear Necessities

Jamie Dickson asks Stuart Robson of Sunbear Pickups for advice on getting more from your magnets

Sunbear pickups have been popping up in increasing numbers of high-end guitar builds at the moment, most notably in Ivison Guitars' Firebird-like Dakota model. Sunbear Pickups' founder, Stuart Robson, is endlessly fascinated by the roots of great guitar tone and, in particular, how pickups interact with the rest of your guitar rig to make incredible sounds – or not, as the case may be. So, as this month's issue is more or less devoted to the quest for tone, I thought I'd tap Stuart up for some advice on getting the best from your pickups, starting with how he would recommend going about choosing a new set of pickups for a guitar that seems to be lacking a certain something.

"The first thing that jumps to my mind is to think about the guitar's natural character itself when you're purchasing pickups," Stuart suggests. "A lot of my work is about trying to match pickups to people's particular guitars. And my philosophy about pickup making generally is that pickups aren't really additive, they're more attenuating or accentuating frequencies that you have at your disposal in the first place. And so, for me, a big part of why I even got into making pickups in the first place was: 'Here's a really nice guitar – but how do I get that really nice guitar to be what it is through my rig?' I think that's something people often don't think about enough: trying to match their pickups to the natural character of their guitar and playing style as best they can. So that's maybe something worth throwing in."

The point is well made. It's easy to focus on isolated bits of high-end hardware as panaceas for our sonic needs. But the reality is that no component works alone. Context, crucially, always gets a vote. This is why it's so hard to give standard answers to questions such as 'how high should I set my pickups', Stuart says.

"One of the main things I would say is always use your ears. So many people want a prescriptive [height setting for a given pickup], which, from my personal point of view, is really quite frustrating," he admits. "Mainly because all of this is personal taste: it's all about what works for you, what works for your rig and what works for you as a player. How hard you hit the strings will impact how much load goes into the pickup and so on. So I'd say don't be overly guided by what anyone tells you [when it comes to pickup height settings]."

PHOTO COURTESY OF SUNBEAR PICKUPS

Sunbear Pickups 59 SBPAF Hand-Aged Nickel & 'Double White' humbuckers embody the company's thoughtful and detailed approach to crafting pickups

Too Close For Comfort

The desire to have a definitive answer to such tonal questions is understandable – music gear interacts in complex ways and it can be overwhelming. But Stuart urges people to simply use the evidence of their ears and make careful, systematic adjustments until they hear what they're looking for, using common sense to avoid overly extreme setups.

"People want to feel like they know they have it right," Stuart observes. "But the truth is that the only way you know you have [pickup setup] right is if you're flicking between the pickups and they sound balanced, they sound good to you, they sound like you want them to sound... So that would be one of the biggest things for me. It's just absolutely huge. Any pickup maker goes through it. You know, people will say, 'I've set these pickups to the height that X, Y or Z told me, but they're not doing what I hoped.' And you'll say, 'Okay, well what do you play through? How do you play?' – all that kind of thing. Then you discover they're set way too close to the strings.

"Never be afraid to have the pickups backed off more than you think you need to in terms of the height. I personally really like pickups quite far from the strings. I think a lot of people are quite eager to get them as close as possible because loudness, initially, might feel like it's 'more tone'. But loudness really isn't necessarily more tone. If you really like it, great, go for it. But otherwise you might be losing some of what's naturally there within the guitar and within the set of pickups themselves."

It also pays to retain a healthy scepticism about the latest buzzwords in pickup design, Stuart says. A few years ago, it became very fashionable for blues and classic rock players to seek out 'low-wind' humbuckers in the PAF style, which are supposed to yield more dynamic,

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS FROM WELLSTRUNG GUITARS COLLECTION

Firebird pickups, as seen in this rare original non-reverse Firebird in Kerry Green at Well Strung Guitars in Long Island, have a unique and under-celebrated sound, say Stuart Robson

nuanced tones than the allegedly blunt instrument of a hot, overwound 'bucker. But, as with all gear jargon, it pays to look beyond the sloganeering.

"Low-wind on its own doesn't mean very much," Stuart argues. "The truth, for me, is that you might be looking for low-wind, but you've got the power of the magnet to factor in as well. You'll see an awful lot of pickups marketed as 'low turn', but they'll have Alnico V pickup magnets in them. And so they can end up being louder than a higher-turn pickup that's got a less powerful magnet. So from my point of view, it's about remembering that *all* the ingredients in the soup matter, not just the one. It's a bit like the 'true bypass' thing on pedals, or a particular chip that a pedal maker is using... all these things are only one part of the chain. And all the other parts play just as big a role."

"Never be afraid to have the pickups backed off more than you think you need to in terms of the height. I like them quite far from the strings"

Stuart's the kind of boundlessly passionate tone-seeker that you could yarn all day with – and doubtless we'll catch up again in future. But before we ended our chat, I couldn't resist asking him what his favourite tone-tweaking mod is. I wasn't disappointed.

"I'm gonna throw in a Firebird pickup in the neck of a Tele. All. Day. Long," he says. "Everyone needs to do that. I make Firebird pickups in soapbar size and full humbucker size because I'm trying to seed the world with Firebird pickups [laughs]. Love them – and they're so they're so undersung, particularly as a neck pickup. It doesn't seem to matter what guitar you put them into, if you wind them carefully and without too much tension in the coil, they are so lively and so toneful and they grab so much of the guitar's character. I just love them!" G

www.sunbearpickups.com

THREE TO GET READY

A trio of Firebird-style pickups

PHOTO COURTESY OF SUNBEAR PICKUPS

Sunbear Mini Humbucker SunBird from £120

Firebird humbuckers are unusual in that each of the two coils is wrapped around its own bar magnet, mounted lying on its side, with a ferrous plate beneath. Sunbear's SunBird set evocatively recreates the magic with a balanced, carefully hand-wound set with a hotter bridge with "full, throaty midrange" and a "warm and smoky" neck pickup.

www.sunbearpickups.com

PHOTO COURTESY OF LOLLAR PICKUPS

Lollar Firebird from $190

Designed to sound "closer to a fat single coil" than a full-size humbucker, and offering "less snarl and more spank" than even a standard-design mini-humbucker, Lollar says its balanced set gives typical DC resistance readings of 6.1kohms for the neck, 6.7k for the middle option and 7.4k for the bridge.

www.lollarguitars.com

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CREAMERY

Creamery Humbucker Sized Firebird-Style Pickup from £90

Want that unique Firebird sound but your guitar is routed for full-size humbuckers? Fear not, The Creamery will wind you a standard-humbucker sized set, with your choice of either Alnico II, V or ceramic magnets, and potted or unpotted construction.

www.creamery-pickups.co.uk

Major 7th Options

Richard Barrett helps you navigate the fretboard as he demonstrates different versions of a major 7th chord

It's one thing knowing a chord – but quite another knowing that chord so well that you can visualise a version of it wherever you are on the fretboard, whether for the purpose of accompaniment or to draw ideas from for melodic soloing or chord overdubs. Obviously, all that's a tall order for a short feature such as this, but if you take note of these shapes and play them over each other with the help of a voice recorder or smartphone (anything will do for this purpose, quality isn't the point), you will hear that they harmonise perfectly. Not quite Steve Hackett/early Genesis, but definitely a step or two along that road!

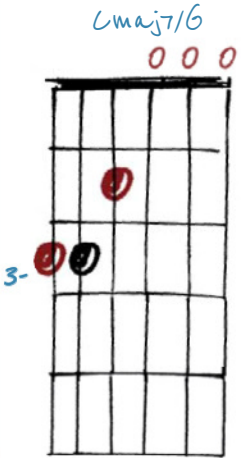
You'll see that some of the shapes require odd fingerings and muted strings in the middle of the chord. These become second nature pretty quickly, so don't let that become an issue – as long as you're not playing with the guitar slung super low like Peter Hook or Slash, then you should be fine. I hope you enjoy these variations and see you next time!

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

Early Genesis is strewn with Steve Hackett's harmonious chord voicings and melodic soloing

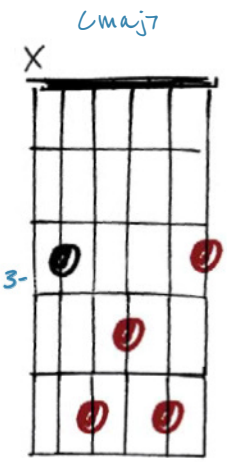
Example 1

In open position it's quite nice to go with all six strings, particularly on acoustic guitar, so I've added a G bass note on the sixth string below the root (C) on the 5th. This version of Cmaj7 combines well with E minor and G. Throw in an A minor and you have the makings of a song!



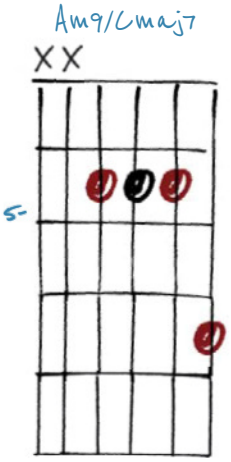
Example 2

This barre version takes the G from the bottom and puts it on top – great for combining with the Example 1 as an overdub, or to fit with other barre chords where an open chord might jump out of the mix too much. Yet another alternative could be short and choppy funk chords.



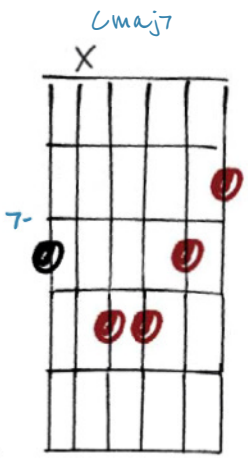
Example 3

As this is written and played, you would be correct to call it an Am9. However, if you're playing this over a C bass note, then what you'll hear is Cmaj7 – an extended version of the relative major. Smaller chords such as this are great for funk playing or 'chord melody' jazz styles.



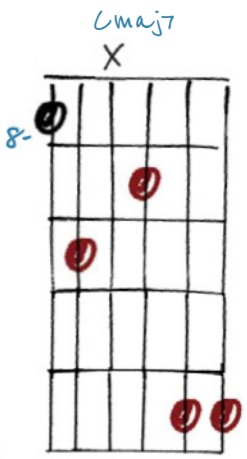
Example 4

The lowest and highest notes in this version of Cmaj7 are both played with a barre that crosses diagonally between the 8th and 7th frets while muting the unused fifth string. This may seem tricky at first (and actually isn't necessary as long as you don't mind missing the high B on top) but you'll likely be surprised at how quickly you get used to it.



Example 5

Finally, this wide-ranging jazz-style voicing of Cmaj7 mutes the fourth string – most of us don't have enough fingers to make use of it anyway! Spread chords like this were very much favoured by George Van Eps, though he used a seven-string guitar to give him extra/lower bass notes!



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Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor.
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STAR LETTER

STAY OR GO?

Halfway through a 40-year career with a well-known aircraft manufacturer, the company gifted me my choice of an Epiphone 335-alike. I'd been wrangling a dreadnought since childhood and fancied some electric blues.

With a familiar fretboard and body shape, it should have been just the ticket, but for the last 20 years it has sat unloved on the rack, between my go-to 12-string and my National Tricone. The guitar is saturated with fond memories of past colleagues, projects and places I've worked, but, musically, we just don't click. I can't get the tone in my head out of the amp, the pots have become scratchy, the pickup selector horribly intermittent and the nut grabs the strings making tuning a perversely jerky affair, despite plenty of Nut Sauce.

So, do I pander to sentiment and invest way more than the Epiphone's monetary value in lutherie, perhaps adding some Bare Knuckles, CTS pots and Switchcraft parts in the hope of getting the fat cleans and crunchy blues I'm looking for? Or should I just call time and go shopping for something unsentimental but functional? Are guitars really just tools for the job, or are they memory capsules that can mean so much more? Advice, please!

Geoff Hardman

Thanks, Geoff. The editor of this tome had a similar dilemma with a 1961 Hofner Verithin that had been bought for him on his 18th birthday. It was a lovely characterful guitar full of pleasant personal associations. Trouble was, its neck had the cross-section of a Dutch barge – a kind of awkward, square-sided U – and it wasn't all that much fun to play, truth be told. But he kept it for years out of sentiment. Then, one day, there were new gigs beckoning that required new gear and funds were needed. The Hofner got sold and, really, it wasn't missed. New memories were made on gear that got played every day and good memories of the past remained intact despite the fact the old Hofner was gone.

So, if you do decide to sell the Epi, perhaps you might think what your colleagues wanted when they gave it to you. Did they buy you something you'd love because they had a high regard for you? If so, we're sure they'd want you to play whatever makes you feel good, in their name, not feel obligated to keep something as a dusty keepsake.

Each issue, the Star Letter will win a pair of Vox VGH AC30 guitar amplifier headphones!
www.voxamps.com

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

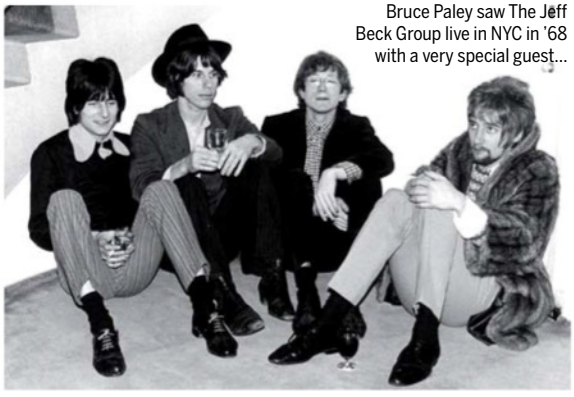
Back in 1968, my girlfriend and I went to see the original Jeff Beck Group (Beck, Rod Stewart, vocals, Ronnie Wood on bass, Micky Waller, drums) at Steve Paul's Scene, a small club in New York's Times Square area. We had seen them before at the Fillmore East, and knew they were a dynamic live group, whose two albums I don't think quite do them justice.

At the end of the gig, Beck announced he was bringing on a friend to play with them. It turned out to be Jimi Hendrix – and my girlfriend and I sat enthralled at the foot of the stage as they jammed. Following the gig, we spotted Beck sitting alone at a table, and, being teenagers, we went over to tell him how much we enjoyed the show. Beck made us sit down with him, and shortly afterwards Hendrix joined us. Amazingly, no-one bothered us as we chatted away. Beck was really sweet, and I was also touched by how humble and soft spoken Hendrix was, given that he was already very famous by then.

During our conversation, Hendrix made it clear how much he admired Beck's playing, telling us that he had learned a great deal from him, and that the chance of meeting Beck was one of the reasons he agreed to relocate to the UK. It's a night I'll always remember, especially how approachable and down to earth they both were – I can't imagine such an encounter happening with any of today's so-called superstars!

Bruce Paley

Thanks so much for sharing this incredible memory, Bruce. It's particularly illuminating that Jimi said getting closer to Beck was a reason for coming to Britain – surely one of the most fortuitous relocations in music history! We love that young fans were able to sit and talk at length with players of Jeff and Jimi's stature back then, before the cult of celebrity walled off musicians from their audience quite so much. What a night to remember.



Bruce Paley saw The Jeff Beck Group live in NYC in '68 with a very special guest...

PHOTO BY IVAN KEEMAN/REDFERNS

Reader Jim Breece found swapping to bone bridge pins added shimmer and complexity to his playing

BONING UP

In issue 492 Neville Marten mentions the staggering improvement in sound when he replaced the stock bridge pins on a Martin D-28 1937 Authentic with bone. I saw a big improvement with bone in two 0-18s, my friend's 1948 and my own 1957. I compared the original (I assume) plastic pins, and both bone and ebony replacements. On both guitars the bone added complexity and what I'd describe as shimmer. When I put in ebony pins or went back to the originals, the magic was gone. The difference was very noticeable and convinced me I'll always use bone on nice instruments. I'm not sure why manufacturers of high-end guitars wouldn't automatically use it.

I've also tried brass pins on a late-90s Gibson CL-20 Standard Plus. The guitar was louder and brighter, but I felt like the brass sort of scrubbed off some nuance in the midrange. Might be good on stage competing with other instruments, but I went back to the plastic, and next time I restring it'll be getting bone pins, too.

Jim Breece

Along with changing strings, fitting new bridge pins must be one of the simplest mods going – and inexpensive, too, for the most part – although we admit we're curious to try out Martin's Liquid Metal bridge pins fitted to guitars from its upmarket Modern Deluxe range, which are claimed to hike volume by up to 3dB. You can buy them as standalone items, but they're around £100 a set! There's always some shard of unobtainium to tantalise oneself with, of course. Good bone pins should do the trick for far less, so if you haven't already, why not emulate Nev and Jim and give 'em a try?

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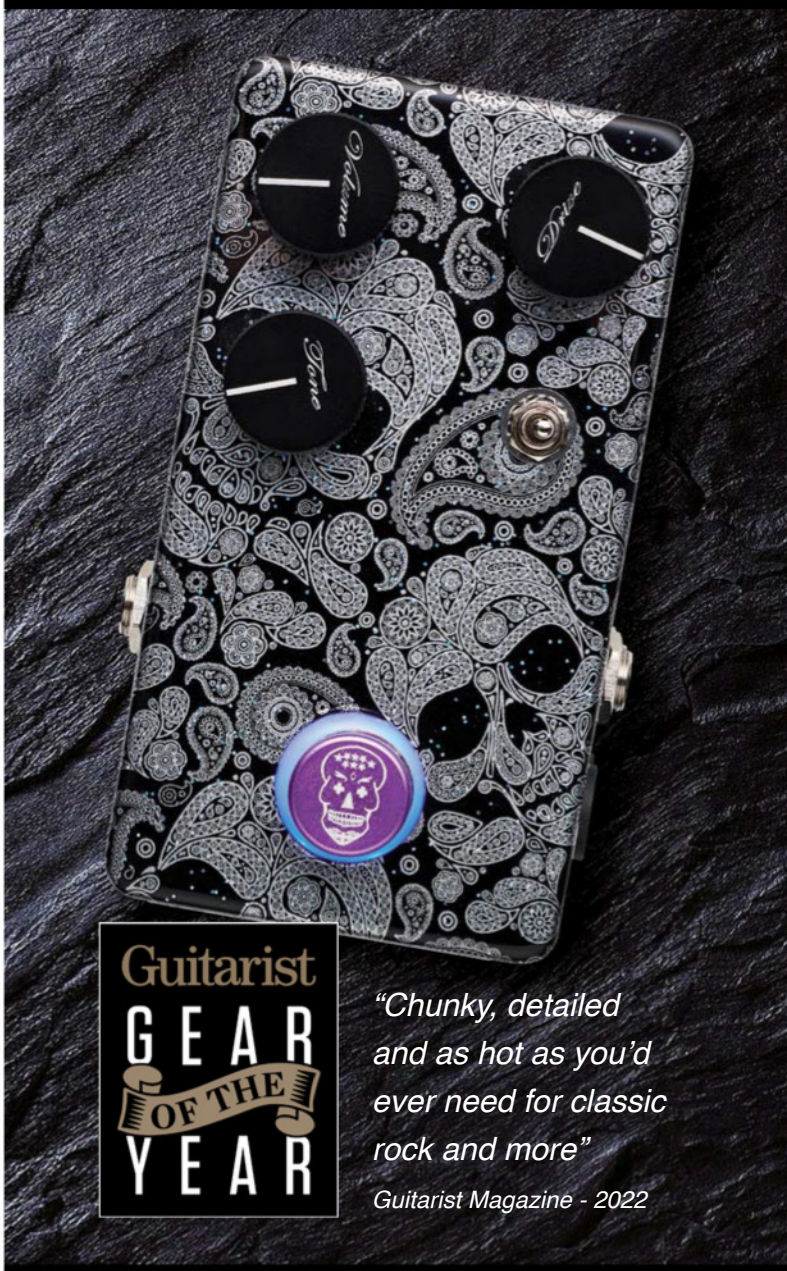


Guitarist GEAR OF THE YEAR

"Chunky, detailed and as hot as you'd ever need for classic rock and more"
Guitarist Magazine - 2022

The award winning Flattley Revolution pedal is one of the many guitar and bass pedals hand built in England by Flattley Boutique Effects Pedals. For more information, demo videos & stockists visit

www.flattleyguitarpedals.com

Barrie Cadogan's tale of regret about a guitar purchase – in his case, a Fender Jag – struck a chord with reader Ash Oxton (and no doubt many others, too...)

CAVEAT EMPTOR?

I really enjoyed the article with Barrie Cadogan (Bought & Sold, issue 492). I particularly liked the part about buyer's remorse – it made me feel better about a recent experience. I've loved Gibson Les Pauls and longed for a Standard 50s. Noticing a really good deal on Epiphone's Slash version I ran down to my local shop and bought it. Six weeks later what I thought was a new love fell very flat and I realised nothing but a Gibson would satisfy my desire. It was a case of 'it's not you, it's me'.

Thankfully, a local shop let me part-exchange just six weeks later and along came the Gibson. Now that sinking feeling in my chest has gone and everything just feels right. It's the feel, the tone, even the smell of the nitrocellulose! Heck, I even tried a Murphy Lab, but the Standard was the one for me. Having read the article it's good to know even those we look up to have similar experiences.

Ash Oxton

Thanks, Ash. This is such an important point. Just because something seems a good deal, gets good reviews and has an illustrious name associated with it doesn't mean you will gel with it. Instruments are just very personal things, perhaps uniquely so. How many times have we all found that a guitar we'd set our hearts on (prior to trying it) was a bit of a letdown to play for the first time? And how many times have we all picked up a random guitar we had no prior interest in and been unexpectedly spellbound? Happens all the time. You made a wise choice in listening to your heart. Enjoy your new Lester.

LOOKING FOR DOUGLAS

I need your help. About six months ago, I was looking at an online auction website where I saw an amazing guitar, the likes of which I have never seen before. It was a Japanese-built guitar from the 60s and the company's name was Douglas. It was the most bonkers production guitar I have ever seen. I searched online, looking for more information and found very little. Even an American-based expert told a Douglas owner that he had never heard of the company. The only thing anyone seemed to know was that the pickups were made by Tokai. Does anyone at *Guitarist* have any information that could help? Has anyone played one?

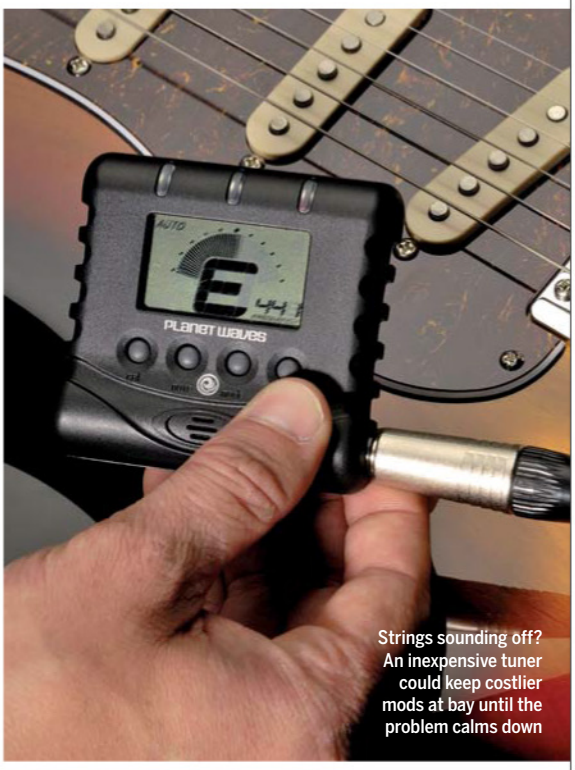
Roy Pendleton

Thanks for sharing your quest, Roy – can any readers shed any further light on the mysterious Douglas brand of guitars and, possibly, the eye-catching model Roy was wowed by? If so, write in and we'll spill the beans to Roy and the rest of the readers.

TUNING IN

During lockdown, with time on my hands, I decided to treat myself to a couple of affordable guitars, namely an Epiphone Les Paul Special in TV Yellow and a Squier Classic Vibe Strat in Olympic White with mint pickguard. In the case of each one, my initial new-guitar feeling was soon replaced with a growing frustration at their inability to stay in bloody tune!

Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor. Drop us a line at guitarist@futurenet.com



Strings sounding off? An inexpensive tuner could keep costlier mods at bay until the problem calms down

At times, it seemed they wandered off pitch simply by being admired. I considered Gotoh tuners, bone nuts, Callaham bridges, Nut Sauce and pencil lead coupled with an expensive luthier to bother my wallet, but lockdown restrictions and general laziness prevented me from grasping that nettle. Instead, I simply played the things with my clip-on tuner as a constant adornment to the headstock. It's just as well I did as gradually they began to behave themselves after around six months or so. All it needed was a little time.

The moral of my humble story is don't expect a new guitar just off the production line to be pitch perfect straight away. Rather than expensive mods, perhaps just a little patience is required to let the body, neck and miscellaneous hardware settle down into a tuneful alliance with the strings. Now, both guitars could last a week without having to reach for my tuner and I didn't spend a penny.

Nigel White

Thanks Nigel, we've no doubt that a simple bedding-in process can ease some initial instability in guitars shipped from afar. Strings stretch, parts wear in, timbers adjust to local climatic conditions and so on. It's also possible that your hands adjusted to the new guitars, too – adjusting to the pressure required to fret chords cleanly and without unconsciously bending them sharp, for example. But some of the grosser lapses of QC, such as a poorly cut nut or a clumsy setup, are better solved with a visit to a tech – remember, such a visit doesn't have to be massively expensive, provided no more than a general fettle is needed. If in doubt, get your local tech to check it out and give their opinion.

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Terms and conditions: *Terms and conditions: By taking part you agree to be bound by these terms and the competition rules at: https://www.futureplc.com/competition-rules/. The opening date for entries is 00:00 (UK Time) on 25 February 2023 and will close at 23:59 (UK Time) on 27 April 2023. The competition is free to enter and entries must be submitted via http://bit.ly/git496pinegrove. Late or incomplete entries will be disqualified. Entries are limited to one per individual. Open to all UK residents aged 18 and over, except employees of Future Publishing Limited ("Future"), Pinegrove Leather ("Sponsor") and any party involved in the competition. There will be three (3) winners entitled to one (1) of the three straps shown in this feature provided by the Sponsor and selected at random. The winners will be randomly drawn from all valid entries received and shall be notified by Future by email or telephone within 14 days of the closing date. Upon notification the winners will be required to supply details of a UK delivery address. If a winner has not responded after 2 weeks of being notified that they are a winner, an alternative winner will be drawn. The prize is non-transferable and non-refundable. There is no cash alternative.*

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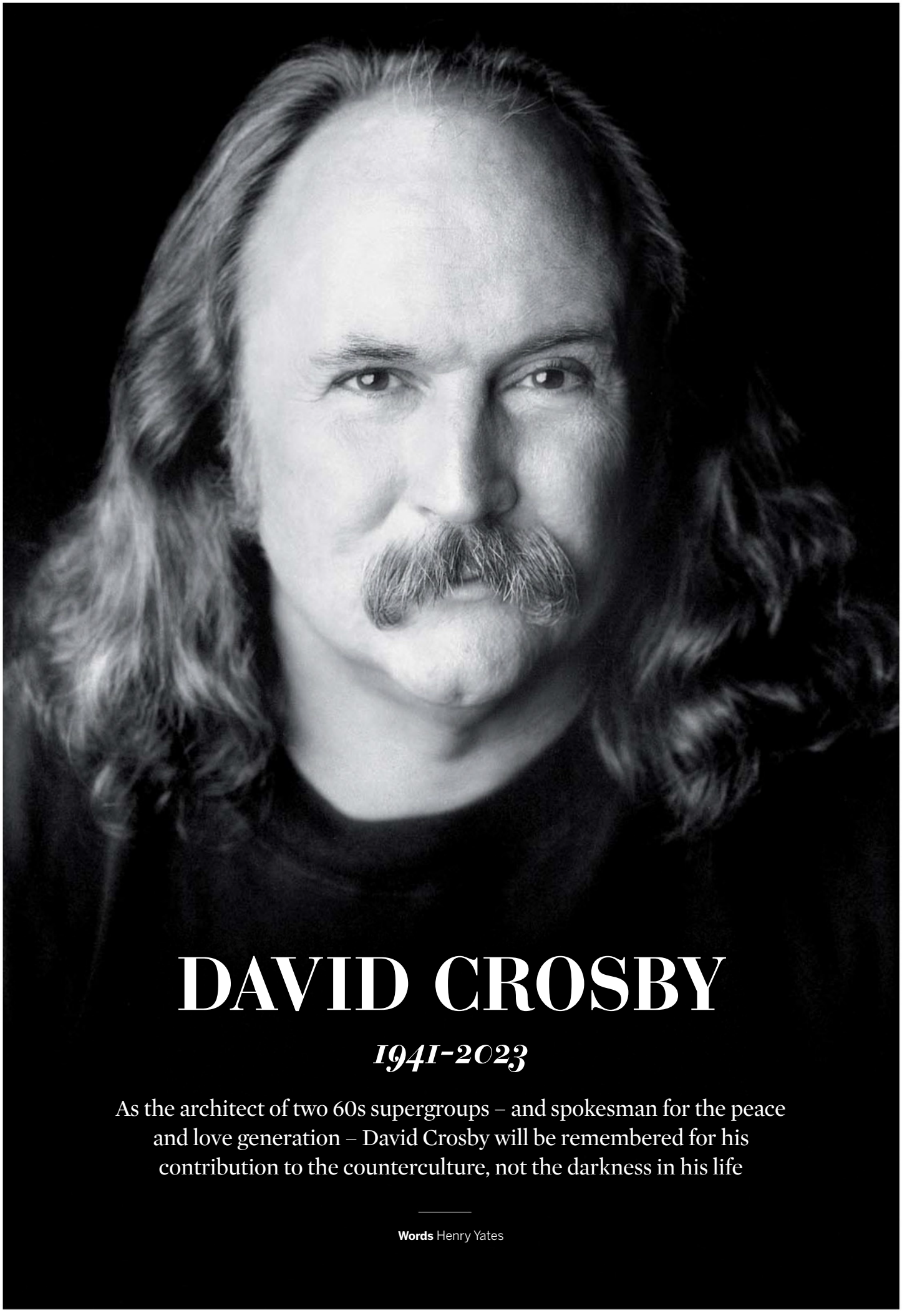


DAVID CROSBY

1941-2023

As the architect of two 60s supergroups – and spokesman for the peace and love generation – David Crosby will be remembered for his contribution to the counterculture, not the darkness in his life

Words Henry Yates

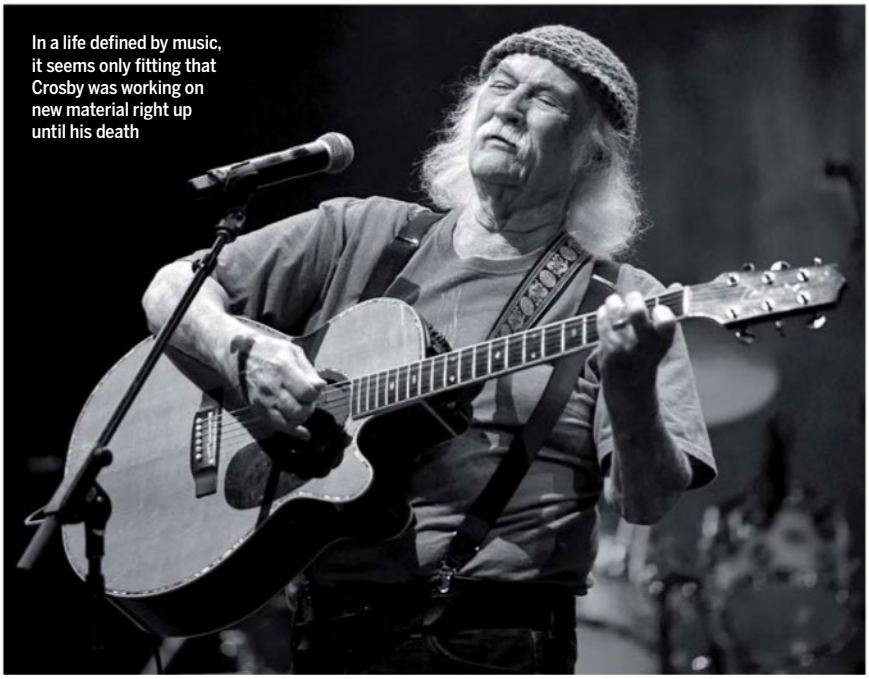
PHOTO BY SMITH COLLECTION/GADO/GETTY IMAGES

DAVID CROSBY

August 1941 – January 2023

For better and worse, nobody embodied the counterculture like David Crosby. Close your eyes now and you'll picture him at his 60s peak, as an idealistic young rebel in fringed jacket and Obelix moustache, offering his worldview from a West Coast stage. Think of his music and you'll recall the wild-honey voice that defied age and gravity all his life, or those underrated guitar skills, standing out even in line-ups that featured such stone-cold pickers as The Byrds' Roger McGuinn and Stephen Stills of Crosby, Stills & Nash.

Quite rightly, it's this benevolent side of 'Croz' that was evoked by the well-wishers when the 81-year-old passed over on 18 January. But it's telling that even the most loving eulogies came with a caveat. "David and I butted heads a lot over time," wrote Stills. "They were mostly glancing blows, yet still left us with numb skulls. I was happy to be at peace with him. He was without question a giant of a musician."



In a life defined by music, it seems only fitting that Crosby was working on new material right up until his death

PHOTO BY SCOTT DUDELSON/GETTY IMAGES

"What has always mattered to David and me more than anything was the pure joy of the music we created together. David was fearless" GRAHAM NASH

As a singer, writer, player and mouthpiece for rock's most outspoken generation, Crosby's genius was indeed undeniable. Yet those qualities were only one facet of a complex man whose estimation of himself as controlling, egotistical – "the world's most opinionated man", as he put it on CSN's *Anything At All* – would at times have been endorsed by his closest friends.

Depending on when you encountered him, Crosby could be the blissed-out utopianism of the hippie dream or its bloodshot-eyed reflection in a cracked mirror. He could be the peace and love personification of 1969's Woodstock festival or the pistol-packing paranoia of its evil twin, Altamont.

In his troubled late 1970s and 80s, weighing Crosby's discography against his rap sheet was too close to call. Perhaps The Simpsons said it best when the singer guested on the show, with Springfield's town drunk Barney thrilled to meet his role model but bemused to learn Crosby was famous for something other than excess: "You're a musician...?"

Born in Los Angeles on 14 August 1941, David Van Cortlandt Crosby briefly suggested he might follow his Oscar-winning cinematographer father into the business. "He'd be shooting at a little fake Western town out in the valley and I'd get to run around," the singer told *Uncut*. "It was something he was a little reticent to do 'cos I was kinda a wild kid and he was a very serious guy. My dad was not a fun guy – he was not a good dad, either."

But Crosby had spent his teens listening to '50s jazz and buying folk records: he cites Woody Guthrie's *Bound For Glory*, Joan Baez's self-titled debut and the harmonies of Peter, Paul and Mary as key influences, while claiming to have "picked up the guitar as a shortcut to sex". That passion won out, making him ditch a drama course at Santa Barbara College to tumble onto the 1964 folk circuit and the orbit of McGuinn and Gene Clark.

"We went to see *A Hard Day's Night*," the Byrds' 12-string legend told this writer in a 2011 interview. "After we came out of the cinema, David grabbed a lamppost like Gene Kelly in *Singin' In The Rain* and said, 'That's what I want to do! I want to be in a band like The Beatles!'"

This proto-Byrds line-up shuffled, with Crosby trying his hand at bass until the arrival of Chris Hillman saw him take on rhythm guitar and high harmonies. "His right hand was good at doing very fancy strumming," noted McGuinn in the same interview. "David could do multiple ups and downs, a good rhythm player. He was bright, gifted and very opinionated. That's just the way he is."

As it turned out, Crosby had bigger plans than emulating The Beatles – or continuing to lean on the Bob Dylan songbook, as The Byrds had on 1965's debut album *Mr Tambourine Man*. While Clark's early dominance kept him at bay, his exit let Crosby submit standouts like the tumbling *I See You*, the wistful trill of *What's Happening?!?!* and at least part of the freeform psychedelic masterpiece, *Eight Miles High*, which channelled John Coltrane and Ravi Shankar to mind-expanding effect. "I think that's the best thing we did," Crosby told *Vulture*. "But we did a number of them."

Still in his mid-20s, Crosby's writing was already sophisticated beyond his years. By 1967's *Younger Than Yesterday* album, he pushed hard for the inclusion of gems like the spooky, jazz-inflected *Everybody's Been Burned*, and *Mind*

DAVID CROSBY

August 1941 – January 2023

Gardens, a song that spiced the familiar Byrdsian jangle with faint unease and underscored his mastery of mood.

But his growing dominance brought friction. One contentious move was to eliminate his bandmates' vocals from *Lady Friend*, rendering the track a blissful wash of Crosby harmonies. "I was a thorough prick," he reflected of his steamroller approach to the studio. McGuinn preferred "a little Hitler".

As a personality, Crosby's onstage sloganeering and capacity to hold court at interview was anathema to the fame-shy Byrds line-up. The inevitable happened in October 1967, with Crosby fired halfway through sessions for the following year's *The Notorious Byrd Brothers* (the band retained his soft-focus *Draft Morning* and the brilliantly slippery time signature of *Tribal Gathering*).

"They came zooming up in their Porsches," remembered Crosby, "and said that I was impossible to work with and I wasn't very good anyway and they'd do better without me. Fuck 'em."

Graham Nash, Stephen Stills and Crosby (left to right) signed to Atlantic Records in 1969 and their eponymous debut that followed took the world by storm

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Depending on when you encountered him, Crosby could be the blissed-out utopianism of the hippie dream or its bloodshot-eyed reflection in a cracked mirror

That short run in The Byrds had almost secured his immortality. But as Crosby told *Uncut*, when he first sang harmonies with ex-Buffalo Springfield man Stills and Graham Nash of The Hollies, he foresaw a musical direction that energised him. "I encountered Stephen and he swung really hard. He could play a kind of music The Byrds couldn't play and it appealed to me tremendously. I wanted that, and I really didn't want to go in the direction that Chris and Roger wanted to go in, of becoming more country."

CSN proved an instant smash (the band's self-titled 1969 debut has since gone four-times platinum) and Crosby seemed as snug as a songwriter as he did within the trio's close harmonies. Composing on acoustic guitar – he favoured the Martin D-45, having bought three of them that year – he swiftly served up *Guinnevere*, a hypnotic stunner in an unusual EBDGAD tuning that, like so many of Crosby's best songs, gave the impression of floating.

"The time signature is odd. The structure of the song is odd. It's me all over," said Crosby. "I don't know if 'quirky' goes far enough to describe my guitar style. It came from a very odd place, man. I'd listen to jazz keyboard players like Bill Evans. They'd play dense chords. I wanted those chords. But I couldn't play 'em in regular tuning. That's what pushed me. As soon as I put the guitar in another tuning, I said, 'Oh yeah, this is what I was looking for.'"

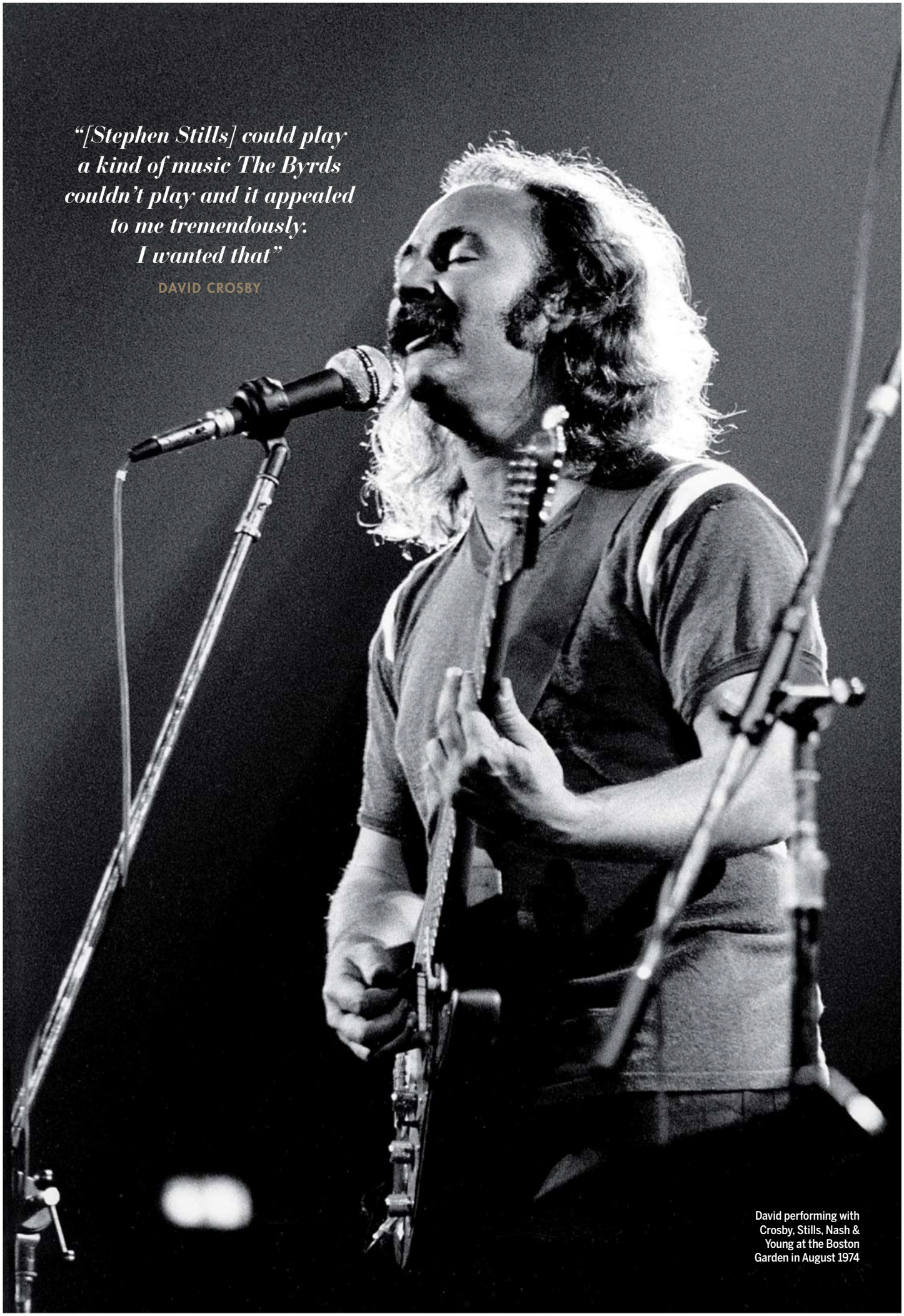
Recruiting Neil Young – and achieving career-best sales figures – 1970's *Déjà Vu* was arguably the musical peak. But CSNY's chemistry was souring, while the shattering loss in a car crash of Crosby's girlfriend Christine Hinton left the singer bereft. For now, he could still deliver the goods, though if you listened a little closer to *Déjà Vu*'s classic choppy rocker *Almost Cut My Hair*, its author sounded ill at ease ('It increases my paranoia/Like looking in my mirror and seeing a police car').

More troubling still, on his brilliant 1971 solo album, *If I Could Only Remember My Name*, was the wordless swoop of *I'd Swear There Was Somebody Here*. "I had this vision that my girlfriend who had gotten killed, Christine, was standing right next to me," Crosby told *Vulture* of the song's heartbreaking genesis. "I could feel her there, her presence. Then I improvised that piece of music while thinking about her then and there. I think you can feel it. If you listen to it, you'll know."

While CSNY stuttered along in various permutations, Crosby's output dried to a trickle as his personal life spiralled. The years ahead would bring the singer to some humiliating lows. Heroin and crack cocaine – and the shadow men who supplied them – became his constant companions, his neglected body a tapestry of scratches and sores. In the mid-80s, Crosby hit rock bottom, serving a nine-month jail stretch for drugs and weapons charges.

"There's absolutely no question that taking drugs enhanced my creative process," he told *Classic Rock* in an interview in 2021. "Taking hallucinogens probably helped, in part, but obviously drugs are all different and cocaine and heroin took me right down. I ended up in a Texas prison. There's no way around it, it nearly killed me, destroyed my career, fucked me up bad."

When CSNY regrouped for Live Aid, commentators took a double-take at the cadaverous figure in their midst. As *Spin* put it: "A 14-year addiction to heroin and cocaine has left David Crosby looking like a Bowery bum."



"[Stephen Stills] could play a kind of music The Byrds couldn't play and it appealed to me tremendously. I wanted that"

DAVID CROSBY

David performing with Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young at the Boston Garden in August 1974

PHOTO BY RON POWNALL/GETTY IMAGES

DAVID CROSBY

August 1941 – January 2023

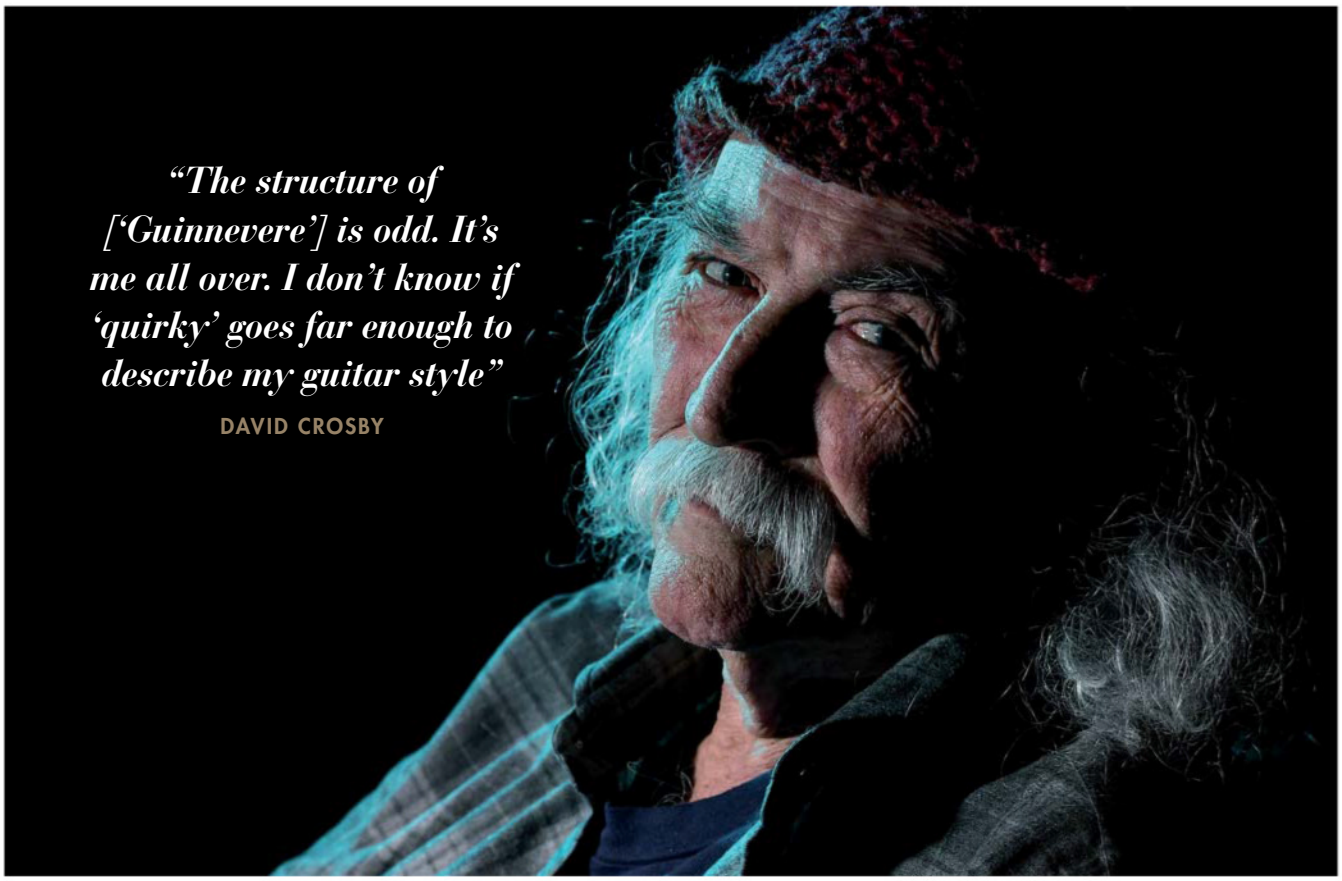


PHOTO BY MATT MCCLAIN/THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

Few were expecting a happy coda from this hopeless case, but Crosby still had a little magic left in him. "I wrote *Compass* in prison about waking up from drugs," he told *Vulture* of the highlight from CSNY's 1988 *American Dream*, which he considered the start of his redemption. "It was when I realised that I was going to come back, I was going to get sober, I was going to be able to handle it, and then I was going to write again – which was crucial. I was sober for the first time when I was released."

Cleaning up for good in the post-millennium – "I'm not clean," he corrected this writer, "I still smoke pot" – Crosby's late period produced some of his best work, including 2018's *Here If You Listen*, which he considered "as good as anything I've ever done". Alongside that, his playing continued to evolve ("I'm a picker on acoustic now and mostly a strummer on electric"). And while physically, he softened into an avuncular silver bear, the young firebrand still raged whenever a journalist proffered a dictaphone. "Trump," he told *Guitarist*, "is like an eight-year-old kid that's broken into his dad's office and he's pissing all over the papers 'cos he never got to play in there."

If he stayed true to his politics, then Croz was also faithful to his love of music to the end. He told this writer of his nightly habit of "taking a guitar off the wall, smoking a joint and playing for hours". He added that the period he was most proud of was "tomorrow". In the days after his death, it emerged that Crosby was readying new material, perhaps even taking it on the road. "He seemed practically giddy with all of it," guitarist Steve Postell told *Variety*.

"His right hand was good at doing very fancy strumming. David [was] a good rhythm player. He was bright, gifted and very opinionated. That's just the way he is" ROGER MCGUINN

It was not to be. Yet for all those wasted years, the astonishing body of work we inherit from David Crosby – not to mention his thumbprint on how we view the world – will resonate. "I'm working on leaving behind my best," said the singer, and he certainly achieved that.

The tributes were as grand as the company Crosby had kept, with the stars to salute him ranging from David Gilmour ("I'll miss the Croz more than words can say. Sail on") to Jason Isbell ("Grateful for the time we had"). But perhaps the final word should go to the man with whom Crosby clashed most viciously yet sang most beautifully.

"It is with a deep and profound sadness that I learned my friend David Crosby has passed," wrote Nash on Instagram, alongside a shot of his former bandmate's well-travelled guitar case. "I know people tend to focus on how volatile our relationship has been at times, but what has always mattered to David and me more than anything was the pure joy of the music we created together. David was fearless in life and in music."

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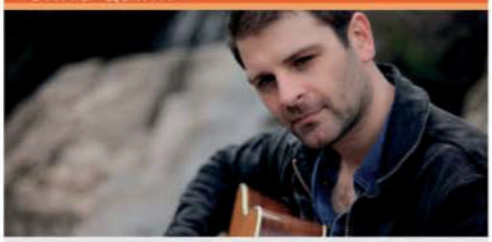
ACOUSTIC SONGS with Chris Quinn



This course focuses on roots based music, ranging from folk to blues songs. You will study guitar techniques used by some of the greats of popular songwriting and also touch on useful fingerstyle methods and open tunings.

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THE MAN FROM UTOPIA

A mercurial six-string psychonaut, Kavus Torabi wields his Jazzmaster in some of Britain's most out-there bands, from fronting Gong to sharing stages with Steve Hillage and former snooker champion Steve Davis. We join him on his quest to find musical Utopia...

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Olly Curtis

Psychedelic rock has never really gone away, but there's a palpable sense it is having a bit of a resurgence – or at least a very vivid flashback – at the moment. And right at the centre of that growing musical mandala is Kavus Torabi. A former member of seminal art-pop outfit Cardiacs, he's been the frontman of Gong for the past eight years, broadening that band's rich catalogue of lysergic prog with compelling new music. Somewhat improbably, he's also the musical partner-in-crime of snooker legend Steve Davis, who has found his new métier playing modular synth in an improvisational trio called The Utopia Strong with Kavus and traditional pipes specialist Mike York. We venture out to Glastonbury – still a centre for esoterica of all stripes – to find out how Kavus makes his intrepid vision for guitar work all across this universe of sound.

Your musical partnership with Steve Davis has led to a band based on live improvisation combining guitar with modular synthesis. How did that come about?

"I met Steve at a show that [French prog outfit] Magma was doing. I knew he was a huge Magma fan – I'm a massive fan myself – and I'd seen him at Magma gigs in the UK but was a bit shy to talk to him because, you know, he's Steve Davis. But I saw him in France and started talking to him because I thought we were probably the only Brits there. And so I started chatting, and, within about 30 seconds of talking to him, he stopped being Steve Davis the snooker player and we really, really got on well.

"I found out he was doing a radio show and he got me on as a guest for the show. He turned me on to so much amazing music and hopefully I turned him on to a lot of stuff. I mean, I'd kind of turned him on to a lot of electronic stuff that he didn't know about – particularly things like Autechre and Aphex Twin – which is right up his street and which I think of as being kind of like prog music anyway: uber-dense, really complex, lots and lots of different meters. So then he said, 'This radio show is really fun. Why don't we start doing it together?'

"We were doing the radio show together for a few years, every week, which was great, and that led to us getting asked to DJ at this electronic music festival down in Minehead called Bloc. We were playing the groovier end of our record collections. We weren't really playing electronic music necessarily... we'd play *Peaches En Regalia* by Zappa, *Supernaut* by Black Sabbath, anything from our collection that seemed like you could dance to it. And that became our particular weird brand.

"We ended up getting asked to play Glastonbury, and then we got an agent and, for a few years, we were DJing. At the right festivals, it would go down really well. But at the wrong ones, the more mainstream ones, we'd empty the place!"

1. The main acoustic Kavus relies on is an easy-playing Taylor 214ce, which he uses across his Utopia Strong and Gong work

2. Kavus's Ibanez Destroyer was bought for £350 on eBay after an initial offer to buy his main stage-use Jazzmaster (see opposite page) from its former owner was turned down. The owner later relented and sold it to him

3. This ornately embellished electric is, somewhere beneath the beautiful decoration, a Squier J Mascis Jazzmaster

4. The guitar's highly decorative one-off finish has yellowed nicely, as the top coat is actually yacht varnish. The artwork was done by Kavus's wife

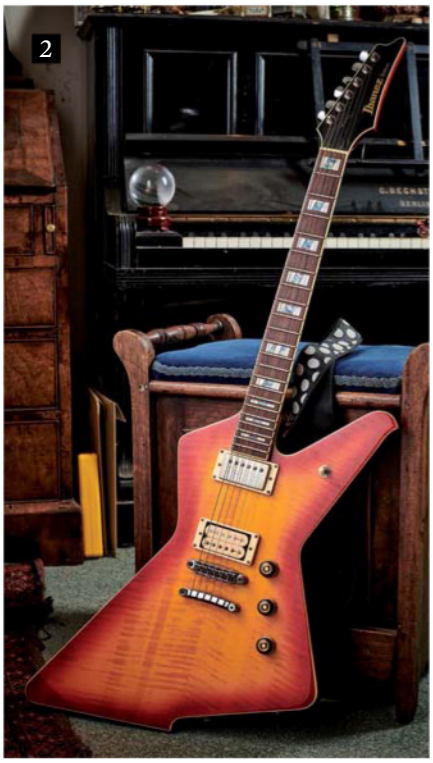
5. Like many Fender offset players, Kavus has beefed up its hardware with a more dependable Mastery bridge and vibrato, which stands up well to touring and "brings out my inner Hendrix", Kavus jokes

How did you start making music together as a band in The Utopia Strong?

"I'd always thought that Steve was incredibly musical. I mean, while we were doing the radio show, he'd be playing some insanely complex, avant-prog from Belgium or something, and he'd be playing and whistling along with these really abstruse melodies... And I said, 'Steve, I know some incredible drummers that can't get their heads round these polyrhythms and stuff.' So I knew he was wired that way and I knew his taste was brilliant. Once he got into modular synthesis, the sounds he was getting were amazing... So we had this idea – let's have a jam with me, Mike and Steve. We had no intention of forming a group at that stage. I just had my guitar and an amp and my pedals and my harmonium, and Mike had his modular synth setup and Steve had his modular setup. But Mike had brought along his laptop and said, 'Well, let's just record it anyway.' And so we spent a day jamming and improvising.

"When we listened back to it that evening, we suddenly started going, 'Actually, some of this is really good.' The next day, we started honing it a bit. Even then we weren't planning on being a band. But I was thinking, 'Oh, this would sound really nice with a bit of acoustic guitar on it,' and stuff like that. Over the course of the next few months, we went on to record some Rhodes piano, percussion and Mike on pipes. And so, between Steve's place and here, we made what became the first album. We ended up spending about eight months on this record – really, really working on the overdubs and the arrangement. By the end of it, we knew these guys at Rocket Recordings, and we gave them the CD. They said, 'Yeah, we love it, we'd like to put it out.' Then we had to become a group.

"Three years on, we've really got into doing it and the way we're making records is really growing as well. So I feel there's very little limit to what we're doing."



"Daevid Allen asked me to join Gong [and] I said, 'But you've never heard me play.' And he said, 'I don't need to – I want you to bring fire'"

Your other main gig is as frontman and guitarist of the current incarnation of Gong. The band was such a pioneering force in late-60s psychedelic rock – how do you approach making music as Gong today?

"Joining Gong was really weird. What happened is Daevid Allen asked me to join the band. I said, 'But you've never heard me play, Daevid.' And he said, 'Oh, I don't need to – I want you to bring fire.' The first jam we had was down in a rehearsal place in New Cross. The thing was, all the way from being 16, I'd write a lot of riffs and think, 'Hmm, it's a bit too Gong-y,' and I'd put it to one side. I couldn't use it because it sounded too inspired by Gong. So Daevid turned up at the rehearsal and I'd come up with a riff that day. I was there early – because I'm always early – and I was playing this riff and he started singing along to it. He said, 'Oh, that's great. Got any more of them?' Fucking hundreds! I'd been storing all these riffs for the day that I got asked to join Gong [laughs]!"

What happened when Daevid Allen fell ill with cancer?

"When Daevid got ill, we'd just made a new record, *ICU*, and we had to go out and promote it. We'd got a 48-date tour booked. Once Daevid dropped out because he'd been diagnosed with cancer, most of those gigs got cancelled except for about eight or nine. I just thought, 'This is a terrible idea.' But Daevid wanted us to continue and we had to promote the album. So I said, 'Okay, we'll do it. But after this, I'm out,' and the rest of the band agreed. But then, as we started to rehearse this stuff, it was like, 'Hang on... this might have something.' So we brought in the drummer Cheb Nettles, who is the best drummer I've ever played with, and we realised it really did have something.

"At the end of this mini-tour, people were saying, 'Well, you *are* going to do more, aren't you?' And my attitude – and all of our attitudes – was, well, we've got to write stuff. If we write stuff and it's good, then we'll do it. Because it felt really bogus to me that we were this band with no original members. But then it struck me that even by 1975, there were no original members in Gong, really. And so Gong is not so much of a band than a mythology. We're about to record another studio album after this tour with Ozric Tentacles. I won't say it's getting bigger and bigger, but it's certainly not a nostalgia band. The last tour we did, we played a two-hour set and we only played one old Gong tune – *Master Builder*. The rest of it was all stuff we've written and not a single person came up and said, 'I wish you'd done more of the old stuff.' So Gong now is us carrying on.

"I think by now we've probably lost all the people who have said, 'No Daevid, no Gong' and that's fine

3

4

5

and totally understandable. But we're doing our own thing. Meanwhile, I get to have the greatest job in the world on the wages of a cleaner, really [laughs]! There's not much money in psychedelic music, but the reward is just to be creating music. And the band are such brilliant musicians. The other thing about Gong is it's brought me back to lead guitar again, after years of not really playing it."

What exactly inspired you to play more lead again?

"I had a real change during lockdown, and also Gong put me in a position where I came back to playing the guitar solos. My playing is so different as a lead player compared with what it was when I was a teenager doing the metal stuff. I mean, [these days] my big influence is this French hurdy-gurdy player called Valentin Clastrier, who just has this incredible melodic language. That's really the kind of thing I'm trying to do with lead guitar in a way.

"What happened during lockdown is I got so miserable I went a bit nutty, actually: I couldn't work on music and I got really depressed being stuck in my flat. It's really hard when I feel like that – I've only had it three times in my life, a sort of depression... But this time I thought, 'Okay, I know what this is – it's depression, fine.' And so I just decided, because I couldn't write tunes, that I was going to start correcting all the sloppy habits I've had as a guitar player going back to being nine years old. And for the first time ever in my life, I started working on just scales. I've never, ever done that; guitar was always a means to writing songs. I'd been turned on to this New York jazz guy called Jimmy Bruno and he had this very simple exercise where he just shows you where the 'white notes' are [corresponding to those on the piano] on the guitar in all these different positions. That's a good place to start.

"There's not much money in psychedelic music, but the reward is just to be creating music. And the band are such brilliant musicians"

"I would spend five, six, seven, eight hours a day just playing scales. And I've never done that before. This is me at, like, 48 years old, just watching YouTube and playing one position really slowly for three hours. Each day, I'd go to bed and think, 'Well, at least I've made myself a better guitar player today – at least the one thing I've done today is I've got better.'

"I started to realise lots of things: I hadn't realised the disconnect between my left and right hand before, how they weren't really talking to each other properly. And so I really started to unlock something, I started to really unlock the fretboard. This is someone who's been playing guitar since they were eight or nine years old, finally unlocking the fretboard. After that, it became like an addiction that I had to play guitar, I had to do scales every day. So getting really good at guitar is my goal now. Because the great thing with any instrument is that it's not like a computer game, there's no end point. You can only ever get better, only ever go deeper in. I was amazed how much that unlocked this instrument that I've always had this sort of love affair with."

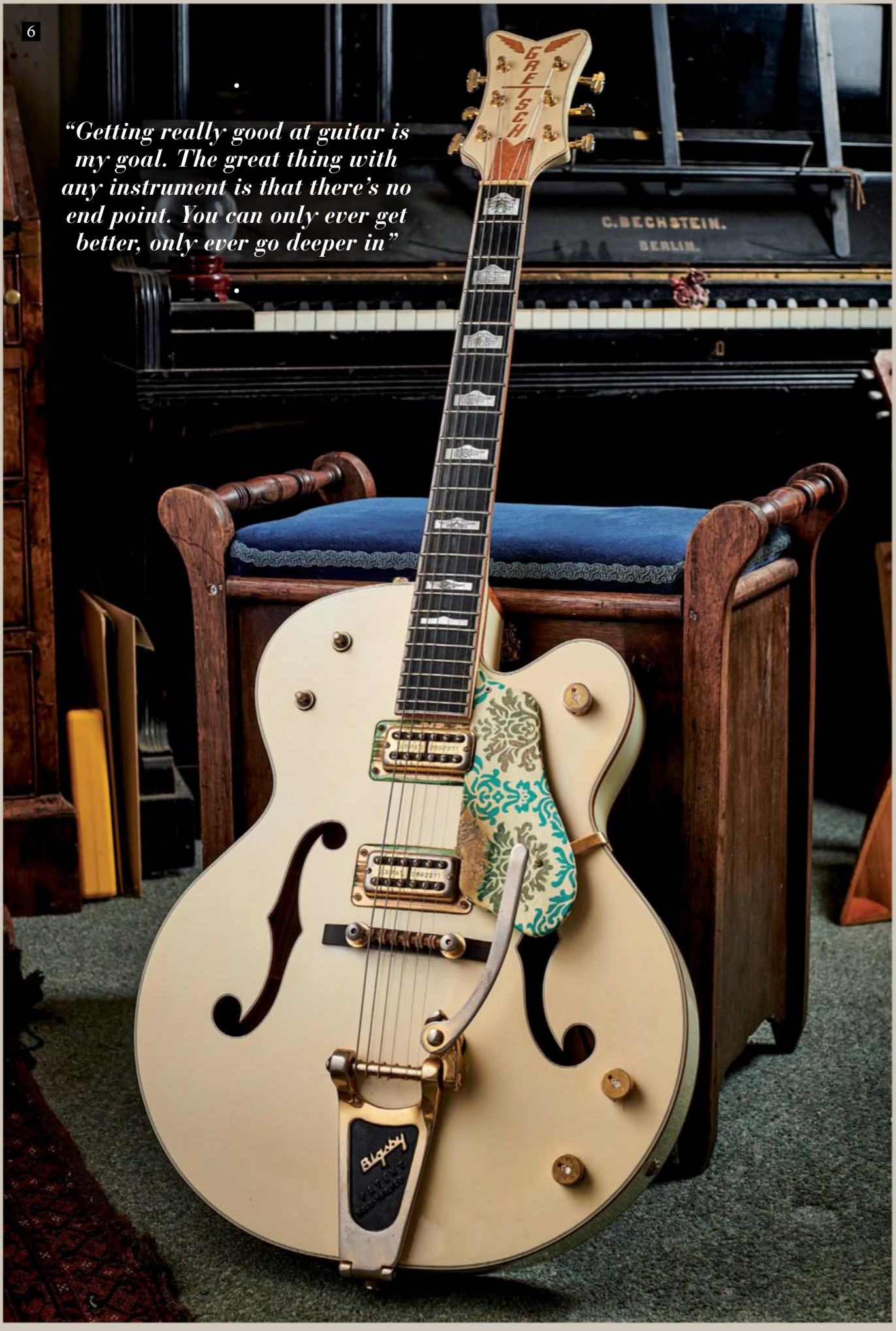
You put in brilliant performances in the 2019 band that Steve Hillage put together to revisit his post-Gong 1970s and 80s solo work. What did you learn, as a guitarist, from playing alongside Steve?

"What I noticed from doing that tour from 2019 is that Steve is very, very fastidious about rehearsing, which I am as well; I can never rehearse enough. I always wish there were two more days of rehearsal before we start. I'm really, really into it. And so I really liked that he is. He was already brilliant, but what I noticed about doing that tour is that every night he was getting better and better at the guitar. He was getting more and more deeply into it and all of the band were [agog]. It was really, really good. Because I think he'd sort of put guitar to one side to concentrate on the techno stuff, which is great. But hearing him get back to playing lead... it was lovely. We used to open each night with a track called *Talking To The Sun*, and at the very beginning it has this full-on twin-guitar harmony lead line. I've always loved a harmony lead and – this sounds really corny, but – just to be stood there with Steve, looking at each other, and doing the real *Hotel California* moment [laughs]. I was like, 'Fucking hell! I'm playing guitar with Steve Hillage!'" G

5. "This is my Gong guitar," Kavus says of his Jazzmaster. "This is my guitar for coming back to doing solos – it's so easy to play," he grins, adding that he's even considering fitting it with more powerful P-90-style pickups that could suit its intense cosmic-rock role well. He uses it with a Fender Dual Pugilist distortion on stage as well as a raft of looper, delay, tremolo and flanger pedals

6. Kavus's early Noughties Gretsch White Falcon was bought from Andertons in Guildford shortly after he joined Cardiacs. "I always wanted a 'Neil Young' one with a double cutaway," Kavus recalls. "But I went down there and, honestly, as soon as I started playing it, I thought, 'This is my guitar'." He used the Falcon all through his time with Cardiacs and with his own group Knife World before the Jazzmaster took over as his main electric early in his Gong tenure

Gong will be touring again with Ozric Tentacles this autumn, for info visit ***www.gongband.com***
For more info on *The Utopia Strong*, see ***https://theutopiastrong.bandcamp.com***



"Getting really good at guitar is my goal. The great thing with any instrument is that there's no end point. You can only ever get better, only ever go deeper in"

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TONE HEAVEN

Sounding great on guitar is about bringing together two things – gear and the player – in such a way that the expressive potential of both is maximised. In the following pages, both top tone-techs and players tell you how to unite gear and technique to reach sonic nirvana...

Words Huw Price & Jamie Dickson **Photography** Olly Curtis

ELECTRIC GUITARS

From truss rod tweaks and string swaps, to hardware and electrics upgrades, there are plenty of simple ways hone your electric tone

2. Aim to be physically comfortable with your choice of string gauge – it's the first condition that needs to be met for great tone

1 GET SET UP

While you're saving up for your ultimate guitar, consider optimising the one you already have. A properly adjusted truss rod can cure fretbuzz and choke-out, and even lower the action. With strings ringing cleanly, nuts slots, bridges and saddle heights can be adjusted to optimise action and the intonation can be adjusted to ensure your guitar plays in tune all over the neck.

2 STRING SELECTION

Select a gauge that is comfortable to play, rather than struggle for the sake of 'tone' – because you'll sound better and lighter strings actually sound tighter with gain. Pure nickel sounds warmer than nickel-plated steel, and stainless steel sounds brightest of all. Round-cores sound warmer than hex-cores and usually feel looser. Half-rounds and flat-wounds produce jazzy tone and vintage twang with reduced finger noise, and coated strings maintain their 'fresh out of the packet' tone longer.

MARTY FRIEDMAN

"Once you realise that your own personal tone comes mainly from your choice of notes, how you interpret them, and the touch of your hands on your strings, you can save a lot of time by not messing with gear settings much. Before a session or a concert, I always tell my tech or an engineer, 'Just get me a tone that any self-respecting guitarist in a bar band might have.' Get a decent sound and let the content of what you play be what identifies you. When the content is good, people will think you have great tone."

3 PICKUP UPGRADES

Installing a set of hand-wound pickups is often the first serious upgrade we undertake. It's one of the more expensive options, but pickup upgrades offer the greatest potential for improvement. The options are almost limitless and it pays to do your research. Check out reviews and video demos, and remember that players regularly swap pickups so there are secondhand bargains to be found.

4 POTENTIOMETER UPGRADE

Darker pickups are matched with higher-value pots, so Jazzmasters have 1megs, and humbuckers and P-90s are paired with 500k units. S-type and T-type trebles are tamed by 250ks. By choosing slightly higher pot values than standard, such as 550k and 280k, you can brighten a guitar. Conversely, 475k or 220k will sweeten the top-end. A potentiometer's taper affects how it responds, with 10 per cent offering a very fast response and 20 and 30 per cent offering finer resolution.

5 CHANGING TONE CAPACITORS

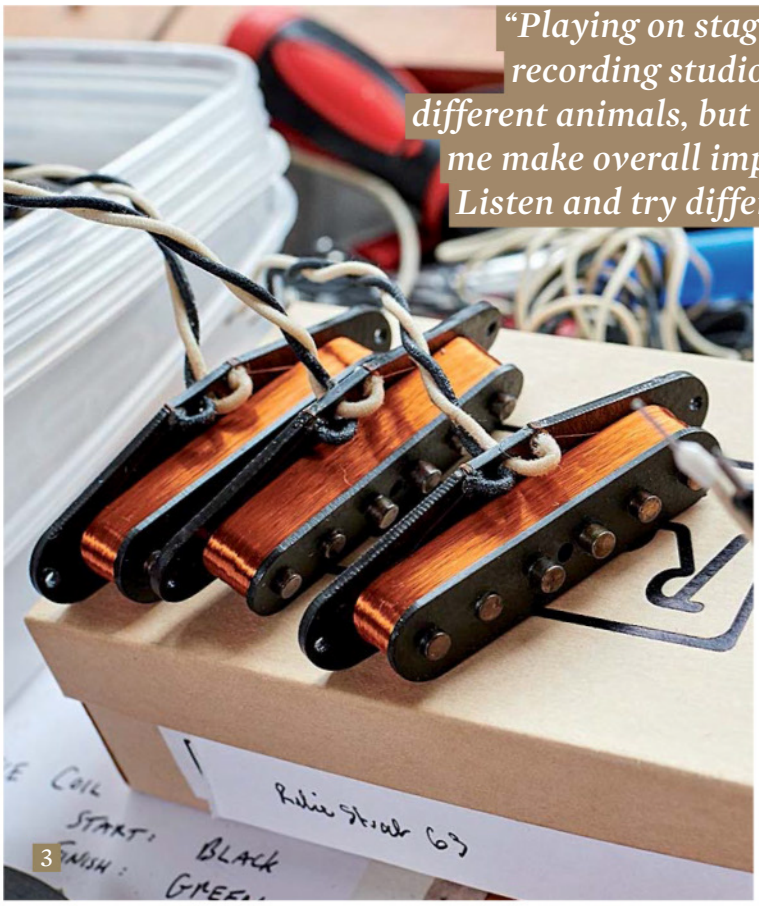
Even with tone controls dialled to 10, some treble content bleeds to ground. Larger capacitor values extend further down into the frequency range, so a 0.1µF or 0.05µF capacitor will make your guitar sound darker than a 0.022µF capacitor. If you're chasing pre-CBS Strat tone, make sure there's a 0.1µF cap onboard to sweeten the treble. And if your humbuckers sound dull, try a 0.015µF or 0.01µF to open up the top-end.

6 PICKUP ADJUSTMENT

No competent sound engineer would randomly set a microphone near an instrument and expect perfect results. Placement adjustments are made so the tone of the instrument and the microphone's sonic characteristics complement each other. Guitar pickups are no different, and by taking time to adjust their proximity to the strings, you can affect output levels, string-to-string balance, brightness and sustain. Use your ears and a screwdriver.

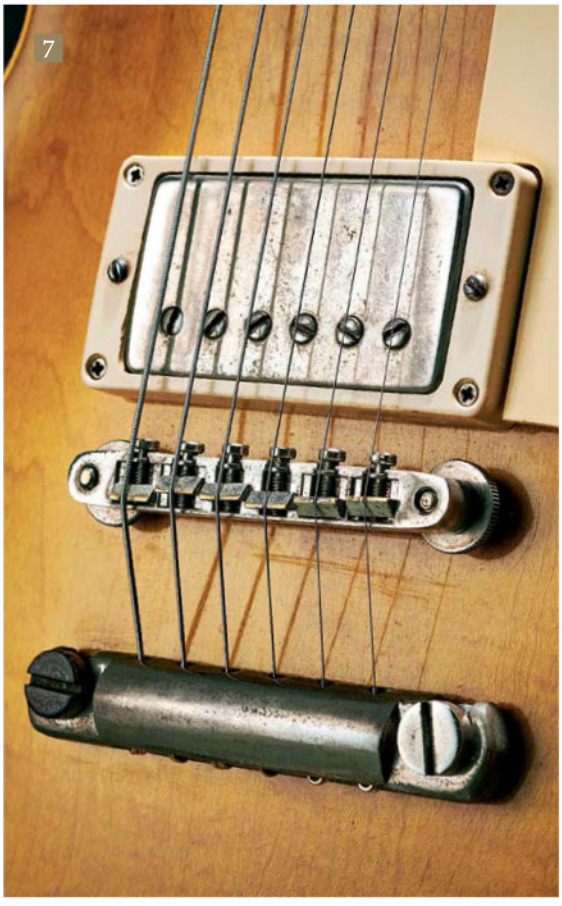
"Playing on stage and in the recording studio can be two different animals, but both helped me make overall improvements. Listen and try different things"

VINNIE MOORE



3. Hand-wound pickups such as this Strat set from Radioshop Pickups represent one of the first ports of call when making upgrades

7. The composition of the bridge hardware has its influence on tone, as with this zamak example on a vintage Les Paul



PRO TONE TIP

BRETT GARSED

"My tone improved when I realised I didn't need to use so much gain and started using the volume knob on the guitar in a more dynamic way."

PHOTO BY TIBBY FLORA

7 CHANGE YOUR BRIDGE

There is now an increasing awareness of the importance of hardware to frequency response, dynamics and sustain. An aluminium tune-o-matic can brighten a guitar, while a zamak equivalent can tame harshness and provide an authentically vintage midrange voicing – especially in conjunction with a lightweight zamak or aluminium stop tailpiece. Options for Gretsch bar bridges include brass, aluminium, copper and even glass.

8 VIBRATO BLOCKS

Fender used cold rolled steel vibrato blocks for vintage Stratocasters that screwed to the bridge plates. Compared with powdered steel, zinc and aluminium blocks they provide more complex harmonic chime, enhanced sustain and a faster dynamic response. Brass blocks can tame excessive treble and may offer even greater sustain than steel, along with a more compressed response. Either way, a block swap is a cost-effective upgrade for low- to mid-priced Strats.

9 HOT WIRING

Humbuckers can be coil-tapped for single-coil tones and single coils can be combined in series mode to produce thicker pseudo-humbucker tones with higher output. Phase switching works for scratchy single-coil funk or Peter Green tones using humbuckers. Active tone circuitry and onboard preamps are useful to some players, and hot wiring can greatly expand the range of sounds a guitar is capable of producing.

10 PICKUP MODS

Rather than change your pickups, try upgrading the ones you already have. An open-topped cover brightens Tele neck pickups and an inductance plate will beef up any Strat pickup. With P-90s you can swap to different grades of Alnico or ceramic magnets, change plastic covers for metal or vice versa, and install different grades of pole screw. The same applies to humbuckers, and in addition to fitting thinner covers for extra clarity, you can remove the covers completely.

11 TORREFIED TONE

When tapped, torrefied/roasted maple necks produce a clearer and louder note with longer sustain than regular maple necks. When used to replace a factory neck, the results always impress. Torrefied tops and braces have become commonplace for high-end acoustics, and torrefied S-type and T-type ash and alder bodies are now becoming available for partscaster projects and upgrades. Vintage tone straight off the shelf.

8. The vibrato block of a Strat subtly shapes its tone, so if you are close to perfection it might just offer the final means to dial in ideal tone

PRO TONE TIP

PAUL GILBERT

"It helps to stick to single notes. Chords can get ugly with distortion. Of course, powerchords work fine – but chords that have intervals beyond a root and 5th tend to create some harmonic infighting. There are good workarounds for this. You can arpeggiate a chord and palm-mute the notes like Eddie Van Halen did on the intro of *Ain't Talkin' 'Bout Love*. Or keep the bass note separate from the higher chord stabs, and keep those stabs limited to two-note chords. For gear, it really helps to have high action. I use light strings so the guitar is still easy to play."

"One of the biggest things that hugely improved my tone was introducing an 'always-on' pedal to colour and very subtly drive my clean sound"

DAN PATLANSKY

PRO TONE TIP

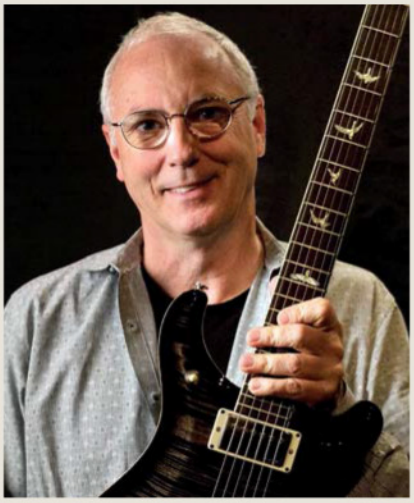
DAVID GRISSOM

"I've learned that you have to 'make the sound' with your hands. Pedals and gear only enhance that sound. Practising unplugged is an eye-opening way to learn to develop the tones you want to hear and expand your sonic canvas."

PHOTO BY GREG VOROBIOV

WOOD YOU BELIEVE IT?

There's been a kind of trending 'flat earth' belief in certain quarters of the internet that tonewoods have no sonic influence and that pickups define most if not all of the sound of an electric guitar. We ask Paul Reed Smith for his take on the theory...



A recent YouTube video purported to demonstrate that tonewoods make no difference to the tone of an electric guitar; only pickups alter tone. What's your view?
"This is a complicated equation that tonewoods are a part of. If the bridge is made of rubber and the nut is made of rubber, the tonewoods make almost no difference. If the theory is correct, all the centuries of work involving tonewoods on guitars would have been in vain. What bullshit.

"Admittedly, if the neck is thin and weak, that will have a very detrimental effect on the acoustic tone of the guitar regardless of the tonewoods, but to believe that how long a piece of wood rings after it is struck and how much of the sound the wood negatively absorbs [doesn't matter] is not thinking well. I started my career stating that first and foremost 'an electric guitar is an acoustic instrument first with pickups on it, and the sound of the guitar acoustically makes a huge difference'. That theory has served me and our company incredibly well.

"A great electric guitar is harmonically rich and bright on the low strings, thick-sounding on the high strings, and rings about 45 seconds. A very poor electric guitar is bassy on the low strings, tinny on the high strings, and rings for about 16 seconds. No pickup is going to fix that! That said, the pickups *are* incredibly important because they have a huge effect on the tone of an electric guitar. I am not diminishing that in any way."

What practical examples can we look to that illustrate the real role of tonewoods in shaping the sound of electric guitars?
"Wet wood doesn't ring and really dry wood – where the resins are crystallised – does."

> *"An electric guitar is an acoustic instrument first with pickups on it, and the sound of the guitar acoustically makes a huge difference"* PAUL REED SMITH

What role does the density of wood play in shaping tone? Some makers believe all woods of a similar density should exhibit similar tonal properties regardless of species.
"Density does help in many circumstances to make the guitar acoustically more resonant, but it's not the only factor. If that was completely true, Stradivari would not have used European maple for the neck blanks as it isn't a high-density wood. This is a complicated subject that has many dimensions. That said, different species of tonewoods can have similarly musical results in an instrument depending on the rest of the factors in the guitar-design equation."

If we make the neck of an electric guitar dense and stiff but the body light and resonant, what results do we get (all other things being equal) as compared with making a guitar with a dense, rigid neck and a dense, heavy body?
"I like the [dense, stiff neck plus light resonant body] equation."

What are your favourite non-traditional tonewoods for electric guitar builds? We're thinking body wood primarily here, but this could also be for the neck...
"I think the primary tonewood is the neck blank not the body, but that's a whole 'nother discussion. If I was to pick one non-traditional tonewood that I really like, it would be Honduras rosewood."

Give us a closing thought on tonewoods...
"If a guitar maker got a commission to make Eric Clapton a guitar, do you really think they'd use balsa wood because 'it doesn't matter'? When a guitar builder's livelihood depends on a musician's emotional reaction to the sound, playability and looks of instruments, it completely changes the builder's perspective on whether tonewoods make a difference. By the way, the musician is going to make up their mind whether they like it in the first 10 seconds of playing the guitar." **[JD]**
www.prsguitars.com

Paul Reed Smith likes to match relatively lightweight, resonant bodies with stiff necks

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PRS GUITARS

14. Gretsch's 'tone switch' was present on some of its electrics and is visible here on the upper horn of this vintage Country Gentleman. It was a potentially great idea that was badly implemented – but it can be corrected

12 TREBLE BLEED CAPACITOR

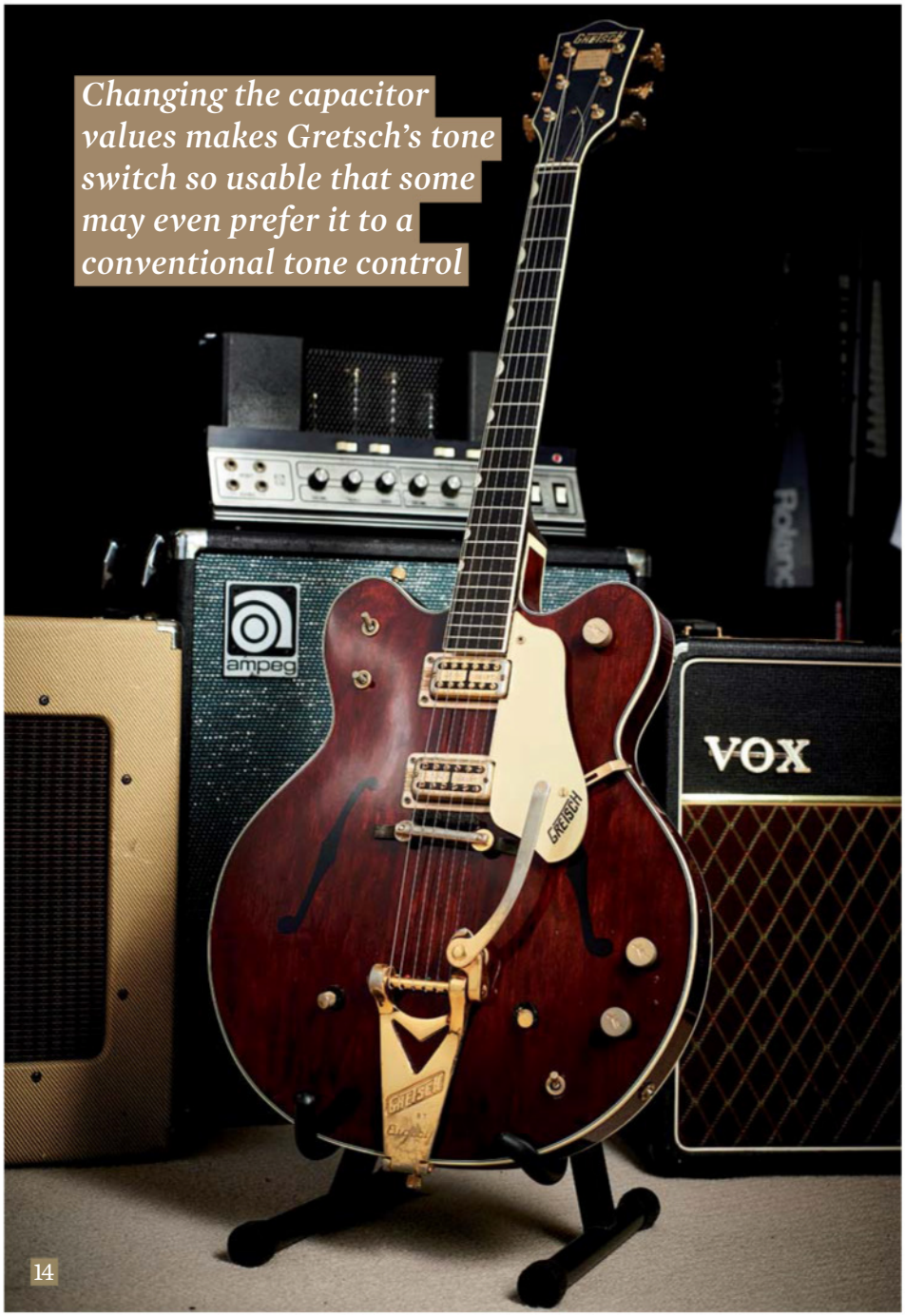
For many, volume controls are basically used as on/off controls because things get dark and muddy whenever we turn down. A treble bleed capacitor is an easy solution that enables you to use the pot's entire range without loss of treble or clarity. There are three versions: a capacitor on its own or a cap with a resistor wired in parallel or series. Schematics can be found online, along with suggested component values.

13 NO-LOAD TONE

Tone potentiometers are variable resistors that allow maximum treble loss via the tone capacitor when resistance is set to zero, and minimum treble loss when set to maximum resistance. The key word is 'minimum' as some treble content will always leak to ground. When a no-load pot is set to 10, electrical contact between the pot's input and output is broken and there's no treble bleed. When the control is backed off, it operates like a regular tone control.

14 MUD SWITCH MOD

With two preset treble roll-off settings and a 'no load' bypass position in the middle, Gretsch's tone switch was a great idea badly executed. The 0.1µF and 0.047µF capacitors Gretsch chose made the treble roll-off too extreme – hence the term 'mud switch'. Changing the caps to the 0.012µF and 0.0039µF values recommended by TV Jones makes the tone switch so usable that some may even prefer it to a conventional tone control.



Changing the capacitor values makes Gretsch's tone switch so usable that some may even prefer it to a conventional tone control

KIRK FLETCHER

"Minimise the things in the signal flow. Playing through a tube amp with good clean headroom like a Fender Super Reverb or for backline a Fender Hot Rod Deville 2x12 gets me loud and clean. I put something like a [Vemuram] Jan Ray in between to push the front-end of the amp. Then I leave it on and use a softer picking attack so I get this natural note bloom. This technique has been around for a while, really – BB King, Robben Ford and so many others."

ALLEN HINDS

"There was a time when we all chased the guys with great tone. If Robben or Larry owned a Mesa/Boogie, then I had to have one. That gets you in the ballpark for sure, but if you have a deep relationship with your instrument it's going to sound like *you* anyway, no matter what you use. One thing I discovered was that I was looking for the right pedal or amp that would sustain and 'feel' great without being too fuzzy or too compressed. Sometimes when you dial back the overdrive you lose the feel or touch response, sometimes get the right feel, but it's too fuzzy – so I learned I liked low-output pickups to hear a more nuanced tone."

MAKING HISTORY SINCE 1958

Jimi Hendrix & Noel Redding
talk strings with Rotosound's
Alan Marcuson. March 1st, 1967.
© Rotosound Archive

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machinery that wound Jimi's strings in 1967.

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AMPLIFIERS

With the help of a tech where necessary, under-the-hood improvements and careful speaker selection can secure that tone you've been searching for

15 TONE CONTROLS

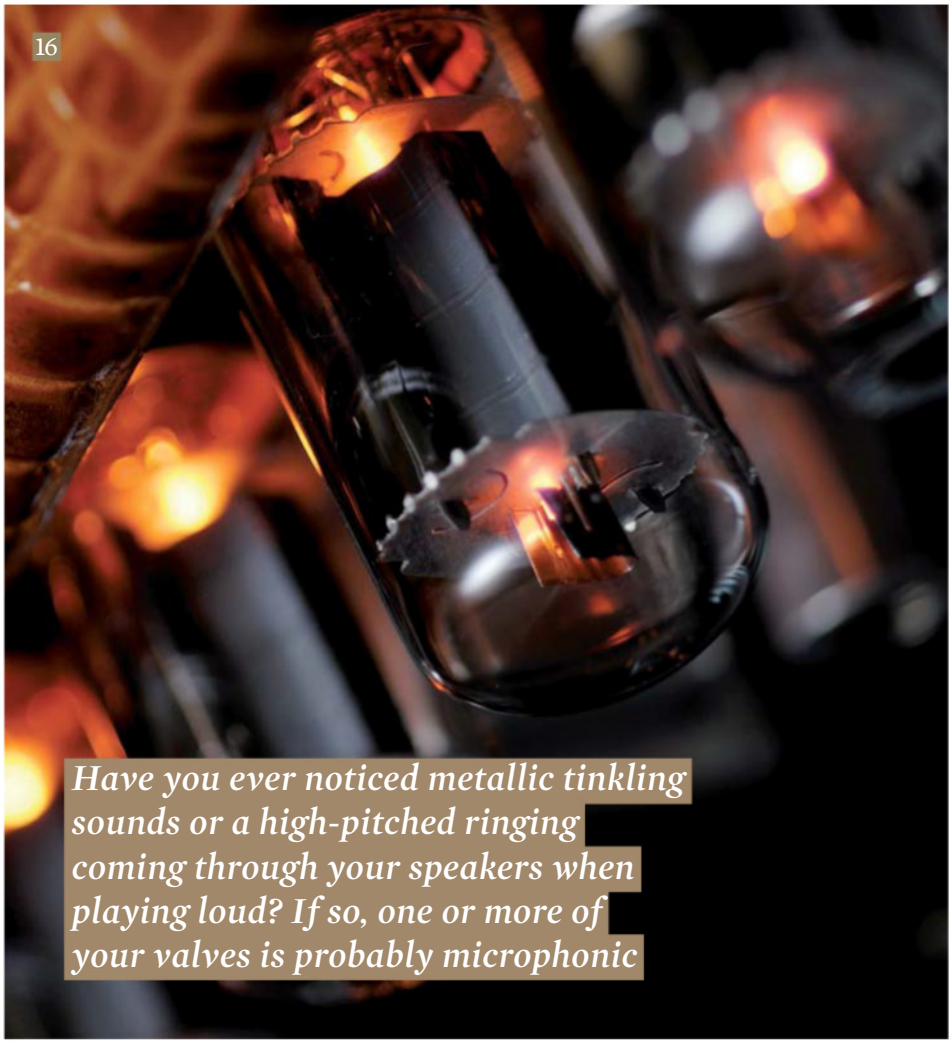
Those 'perfect' amp settings, carefully dialled in at home, rarely translate to other environments. In an echoey and bright-sounding room, you may need to reduce treble and presence, and if your amp is tucked into a corner, the bass and middle controls can minimise boom and clutter. Volume levels also affect our frequency perception, so bass may need a boost at low volume and treble can be strident at high volume. Don't be afraid to use your ears and your equalisation controls to optimise your tone in different environments.

16 GET BIASED

Power valves are designed to run within specified parameters and there is a bias range – typically cold to hot – in which the valves can operate safely. For high clean headroom and punchy dynamics, try having them biased towards the cooler end. But be aware that if set too cool, the amp will sound sterile and bland. If you prefer power valve overdrive and a softer dynamic response, a hotter bias may suit you, but excessively hot bias will shorten valve life. It's a job best left to a pro, but discuss your preferences beforehand.

17 DODGY VALVES

Have you ever noticed odd metallic tinkling sounds or a high-pitched ringing coming through your speakers when you're playing loud? If so, one or more of your valves is probably microphonic. It's most noticeable with preamp valves towards the front end of the signal path because every subsequent stage amplifies the noise. Remove any metal covers, turn your amp on and gently tap the valves with a wood or plastic chopstick. Microphonic valves will amplify the tapping so you can identify which need replacing.



16. It's essential to ensure that your power valves are biased correctly – but this can be finessed to a degree to deliver your preferred style of tonal response

JOEL HOEKSTRA

"Realise that the sound of the guitar is extremely important. Much is made about boutique amps and about the playability/versatility of boutique guitars. For me, finding Gibson Les Pauls as my instrument of choice fairly late was a 'Doh!' moment. I wish I'd been on one throughout the 80s and 90s."

18 VALVE 1 SWAP

Unlike power valves, most preamp dual-triodes can be substituted for one another. The 12AX7/ECC83 is by far the most common, but many Tweed Fender circuits were designed for a lower gain 12AY7/6072a in the first position and a 12AX7 can be substituted for additional gain. If you're struggling for clean headroom, try a 12AY7 in place of a 12AX7, and if that proves too underpowered, a 5751 with a gain factor of 70 may be ideal. Turn your amp off when you're swapping valves and try not to bend the pins.

THE FULL MONTY

Matt Gleeson of Monty's Guitars has serviced, modded and generally fettled more guitars then he cares to remember. Here, he shares his favourite tweaks for popular electric guitars

The standard tone controls of a Strat can be rewired to offer custom tonal options

Matt Gleeson, founder of Monty's Guitars, is a professional tone-tweaker to the bone. From his hand-wound pickups, to the upgraded wiring looms and specialist capacitors Monty's sells, his daily round is devoted almost exclusively to making guitars sound and play better. Who better, then, to ask about the best general tone upgrades for the main types of electric guitar we all play. Before we get into that, however, Matt is careful to start with the most important tone-tweaking measure of all...

"The best approach with any guitar, of any brand or type – acoustic, bass, anything – is to get it set up properly before you do anything else, so everything's balanced and the strings can vibrate freely, as they should do. Then you know that they're giving out and you can kind of tinker from there."

With that out of the way, we turn our attention to some nifty tweaks that can bring your guitar that little bit nearer to tonal perfection.

STRAT TIPS

"If you have a vintage-style Strat, you can obviously do things like [connect] the bridge pickup to the tone control. George O'Malley, here at Monty's, actually wires his Strat so the first tone knob works on the neck pickup, while the second tone knob affects the bridge, which means that in positions 2 and 4 the tone never gets too dull, which actually makes those positions a little bit more usable.

"Another thing you can do, if your Strat is sounding a little bit dull, is fit 50s-style 'Les Paul' wiring. Basically, that's just taking the pickups away from [direct connection to] the tone control, so they're not 'seeing' the capacitor all the time. Again, this just gives a little bit more clarity. Obviously, we're talking about the last one per cent of difference that you might look for if you've got the rest of your Strat right and you're really homing in on what you like. But those are inexpensive mods you can do with just a bit of soldering.

"After that, then you're looking at changing components. If, for example, you have a six-screw vintage-style bridge with a steel block, you could try an aluminium block to add a little bit more brightness. Or vice versa, a steel block gives you a little bit more punch. But again, these are all small differences. You could also try changing the nut material. If you want to upgrade from a plastic nut, I'd go for either a natural bone nut or what we use a lot here – something called Nature's Ivory, which is tagua [a product of the ivory palm tree], which is what they use in Japan and it looks just like ivory. It sounds great and is actually nice to work with – and doesn't smell like death! And because it's got oils and stuff in it, it's sort of naturally lubricated."

TELECASTER TIPS

"Again, there's this magical 50s-style wiring, shifting the capacitor away from the volume control, which makes a massive difference [ie, moving the wire that typically links the input lug of the volume to the tone, to the centre lug instead – Ed]. There's also the value of the capacitor: I prefer using a 0.22µF or even a 0.15µF in Fenders, rather than the 0.47µF. Because when you're in the heat of battle, a .47 is quite aggressive so if you roll it off, if you knock it back too hard, it just goes really dull. But with a 0.22µF you've basically got more usable scope for fine control. If your Tele is too bright and you wanted to take that back a little bit, saddles make a big difference.

"But it's not as simple as steel saddles do 'this', brass saddles do 'that'... sometimes different manufacturers offer different sizes of saddle and that also plays into it. Again, we're talking about that final few per cent of tonal variation, but in general if you feel your guitar is too bright, I'd go with brass barrels – or something like some Gotoh InTunes, which are quite big, solid, and they'll intonate.

"Another thing that you'll want to check on Telecasters that are too bright and microphonic is that the bridge plate is firmly attached to the body. If that's loose in any way, the front of it will do that 'bell' thing [ringing sound when struck] that an unpotted pickup might do. In some situations that [volatility] can be useful, but most of the time you need to make sure anything like that is dampened down. If you don't want to put [extra] screws into it and screw it directly to the body, you might want to try putting a bit of wax underneath it or something's going to dampen it. And that will take some of the shrillness away."

GIBSON TIPS

"If you fit a lower-value capacitor on the neck [pickup of a humbucker-equipped Gibson] – such as a 0.15µF cap – it will tend to make it a little bit more usable across the full range of tone control settings, especially if your guitar's a little bit weighted towards the warmer side [generally, a higher capacitor value, such as 0.22µF, will make the pickup's tone darker when the tone control is rolled off than a lower-value cap, such as a 0.15µF, will – Ed]. Also, it pays to make sure that the wiring is all set up advantageously for the sound you want. 50s-style wiring makes everything sound a bit more 'airy', to my mind.

"With Gibsons and other guitars fitted with a tune-o-matic-style bridge, you'll sometimes find the bridge has been fitted backwards, with large intonation screws facing towards the tailpiece. That can lead to a situation where the string passes across the saddle then fouls the top of the screw on its way down to the tailpiece, which is kind of crazy. Not only is that an unnecessary friction point but also it decreases the break-angle over the saddle, which you don't want. So something as simple as flipping that bridge around so the screws are facing forwards just eliminates that, which is a good thing." **[JD]**

www.montysguitars.com

19 BRIGHT CAPS

During the 1950s Fender introduced 'bright caps' and later made this a switchable feature. Functioning much like a treble bleed capacitor, bright caps have been used on various Fender, Marshall, Matchless and Mesa/Boogie amps. Excessively bright amps may benefit from having a bright cap modified or removed altogether, while naturally dark amps such as vintage Vox models can be opened up by having one fitted.

20. Often overlooked, speaker swaps are potentially even easier to perform than changing pickups and yield equally dramatic tonal differences – if not more so

20 SPEAKER SWAP

Guitar speakers all have distinct sonic attributes that are mostly attributable to their midrange voicing and they exert a dramatic effect on guitar tone. Some are very bright, which will open up dark-sounding amps but can sound harsh with naturally bright amps. Some are loose and flabby, while others are engineered for bass definition with attenuated treble. High-sensitivity speakers will also make any amp sound louder and provide additional clean headroom for lower powered amps. The key is to combine amplifiers and speakers with complementary characteristics.

"Think like a painter having different colours on their palette. The best tone is always the one that best serves the music"

BILL NELSON

19. Despite being rightly recognised as classics, original vintage amps such as this Vox AC30 weren't necessarily perfect design-wise and sometimes a judicious capacitor swap can improve them even further. Always get a trained tech to make any such upgrades, however, as even switched-off amps can deliver lethal shocks

21 ATTENUATION ADVANTAGES

Most valve amps have a 'sweet spot' that can only be enjoyed when the volume reaches a certain level. Unfortunately, that level is often too high for home and stage use, too. Overdrive and compression pedals can compensate to some extent, but it's not the same. An attenuator can provide the solution and, so long as you aren't using it to make things whisper-quiet, you can enjoy your amp's full fat saturation with no detriment to its tone.

STEVE LUKATHER

"Well, as we all know, chasing tone and trying new ideas is an eternal quest. New ideas, new gear, new chops all lead one to try new things. I have been on 'tone quest' for 50-plus years! Having said that, I have also tried many different sounds and went through every era of guitar tones, amps, pedals, Bradshaw, stompboxes, plug direct into amp. I tried them all, used a lot of it and sometimes *over*-used some of it. The 80s [laughs]! Now, less is more: using less effects and a little less gain and playing a bit more restrained."

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MACHINE MODELING

22 RECTIFIER SWAPS

Rectifier valves are used to convert the AC supply into DC and supposedly identical rectifiers can output significantly different voltages. Higher HT voltages will make an amp cleaner and punchier, while lower voltages result in earlier overdrive and more sag. If you want the former, get your amp checked and install a better valve rectifier or solid-state plug-in rectifier if needed. A 5Y3 rectifier can sometimes be replaced with GZ34/5R4 to increase HT voltage, and a 5V4 or 5Y3 can be used instead of a GZ34/5AR4 to lower voltages. A tech should ensure your amp can cope with the rectifier's current draw and verify the bias after swapping.

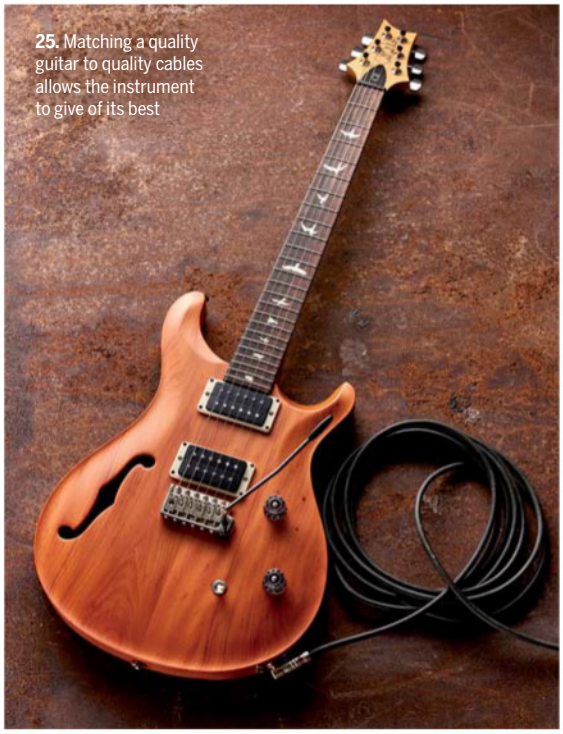
23 TIGHTENING UP THE BASS

Lots of vintage-style amps work very well at lower volume levels and in recording situations but get over-compressed and saggy when they're cranked up to gig volume. Often these amps have relatively puny filter caps rated at 8µF or 16µF. Upping the values to 22µF is a common mod that tightens up the bass response and reduces compression, but check this over with a qualified tech before modifying your amp.

22. Valve rectifiers, as pictured, are associated with a bluesy 'sag' when you dig into notes

"The ability to really use your hands for minor variance in tone and feel corresponds to the amount of compression in your signal"

JOSH SMITH



25. Matching a quality guitar to quality cables allows the instrument to give of its best

PRO TONE TIP

BILL NELSON

"Many years ago I came to the conclusion that there's no single ideal tone. There are so many tones to use; think like a painter having different colours on their palette. The best tone is always the one that best serves the music. It can even change from one section to another within the same song. Basically, there's no such thing as a 'bad' tone, only an inappropriate one. A tone that may sound wrong on its own might sound great in the right context, it all depends on what mood you're trying to evoke. So keep an open mind and paint with sound."

PHOTO BY MARTIN BOSTOCK

PRO TONE TIP

VINNIE MOORE

"Much of your tone comes from your technique so lots of practice was the start of [my tone journey]. Then it was a matter of using my ears and trying different pickups, amps, speakers, and guitars to hone in on what worked best. It pretty much all comes down to experimentation. Recording and listening back was a big help. For guitarists, the quest for tone seems to never end. If you keep at it you'll continue to make small improvements a little at a time, so persistence is a good thing. Playing on stage and in the recording studio can be two different animals, but both helped me make overall improvements. For me, it's listen and try different things."

PHOTO BY KEVIN NIXON / CLASSIC ROCK

24 BASS CONTROL

Some amps are naturally too bassy, while others sound bass-light. Sometimes a speaker swap can reveal that the amp passes too much low-frequency content; for instance, converting a Princeton Reverb from a 10-inch to a 12-inch speaker. Although it's a job best left to a qualified tech, the excess bass can be corrected by removing the stock signal capacitors and installing replacement caps with smaller values. This is a great fix for the famously flabby 5E3 Deluxe circuit.

25 QUALITY CABLE

Assuming you're not using a wireless transmitter, you'll need a cable to connect your amp and guitar. Unlike speaker cables, guitar cables are shielded and the two basic requirements are low resistance to retain signal strength and low capacitance to minimise treble loss. A decent-quality cable is an upgrade for all your guitars and so long as you don't fall for all the snake oil and pseudo-science, you don't have to spend a fortune.

GAIN, WITHOUT PAIN

Amp design expert and general tone guru Adrian Emsley of Orange on how to use pedals and your amp's own gain controls together to get incredible drive sounds

Do you have a particular way of dialling in amps to sound good?
"There are loads of different ways to do this, depending on what you want to achieve. A lot of people get things like Super Overdrives, Tube Screamers and Klons and use them into a clean amp and wonder why they sound terrible. But get some 'hair' on the amp and those kind of pedals will give you a lot more of what the amp's doing. That's how to use them, you know?

"Adding an [overdrive] pedal to an amp with some 'hair' actually gives you more of what the amp's doing and tightens the bottom-end up" ADRIAN EMSLEY

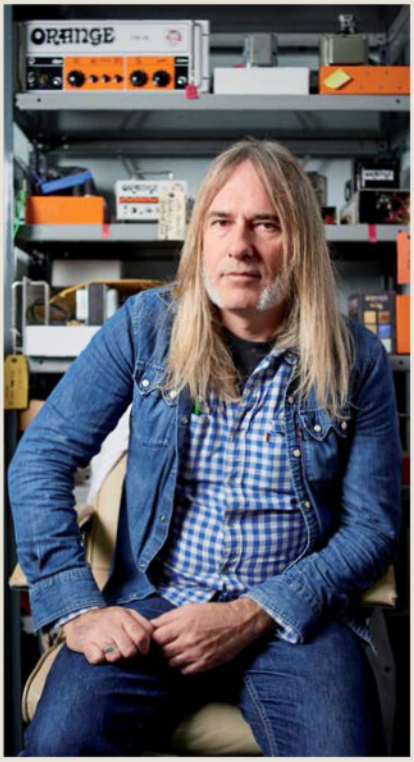
"A lot of people who use pedals like this make that mistake and then go, 'I can't get a sound out of it...' And that's because they haven't got a sound on their amp. But that's a mistake people have been making for the last 40 years, you know? So they go, 'Oh, it sounds terrible,' but it's not – [a pedal such as a Tube Screamer or Super Overdrive] is just designed to tighten up the bottom-end and add some saturation in the background to the sound, which, when you add it to an amp with some hair, accumulates. So what it actually ends up doing is giving you more of what the amp's doing and tightening the bottom-end up."

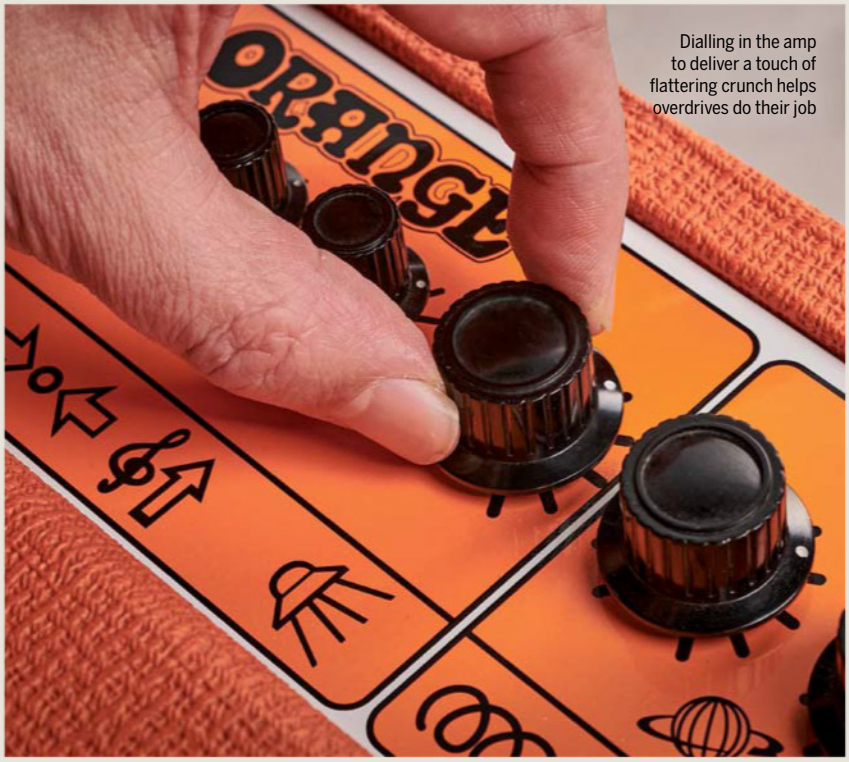
How about really high-gain sounds – how do you keep definition and clarity while adding enough gain to really burn?
"Well, I mean the same [principle of setting up some gain on the amp and then pushing it with overdrives] can do it, if you've got an amp with two stages or three stages of gain and you've got a good 'Malcolm Young' sound dialled in to begin with. If you start with a good 'Malcolm' sound on the amp and then you hit it with something like [a mid-rich OD pedal], that will give you that high-gain sound probably better than anything.

"For high-gain tones you might want to be keeping the power amp quite clean [producing clearly defined amplified sound without additional clipping being generated in the amp's power stage]. In that situation, you need wattage because this would be your classic Zakk Wylde approach: he uses EVs [as speakers of choice in his cabinets] and those stay cleaner, plus he uses 6550 output tubes, which also stay cleaner. So he's using 100 watts, but he's probably got it set a few decibels shy of getting [distortion occurring] in the power amp. So, in that scenario, he's pushing lots of air and then he'll hit it with a Super Overdrive.

"The tone stack is working as a filter in that scenario and not as a shaper. So you set a slight smiley face on the amp [an EQ setting featuring elevated bass and treble settings and a gentle scoop in mids]. And I've experienced that because I did a Rammstein [covers] set and that's what I did: I hit a high-gain amp with a Klon but kept the power amp clean. And it works like a charm for that kind of sound.

"But, obviously, if you've got an amp that's capable of doing all the gain, like an SLO or a Rockerverb, then you probably do it basically the same way. You probably keep the power amp clean and lean into the wattage – you need to make sure you've got the wattage there for this to work – and then set the tone stack [preamp controls] accordingly. That's how Jim Root uses a Rockerverb; he tends to use preamp gain." **[JD]**
www.orangeamps.com

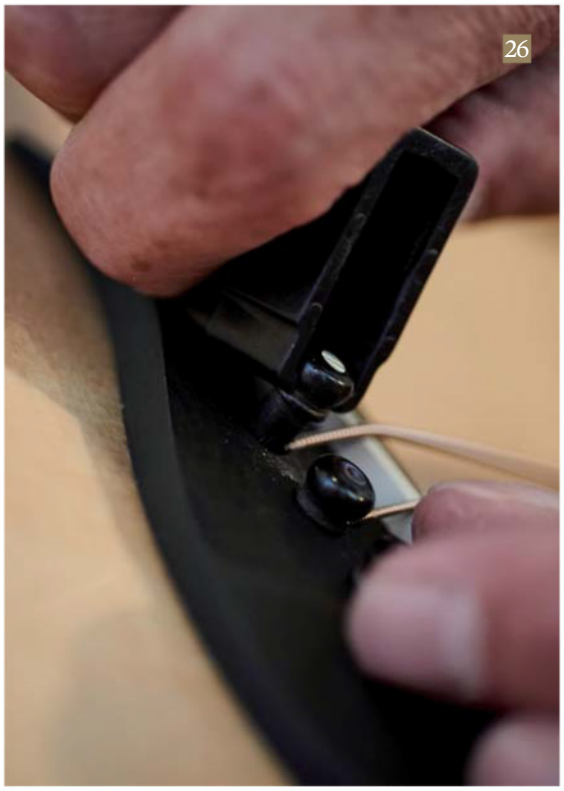




Dialling in the amp to deliver a touch of flattering crunch helps overdrives do their job

ACOUSTIC GUITARS

When your unplugged tone is under the spotlight, there's little place to hide. Luckily, there are myriad ways to enhance your acoustic output

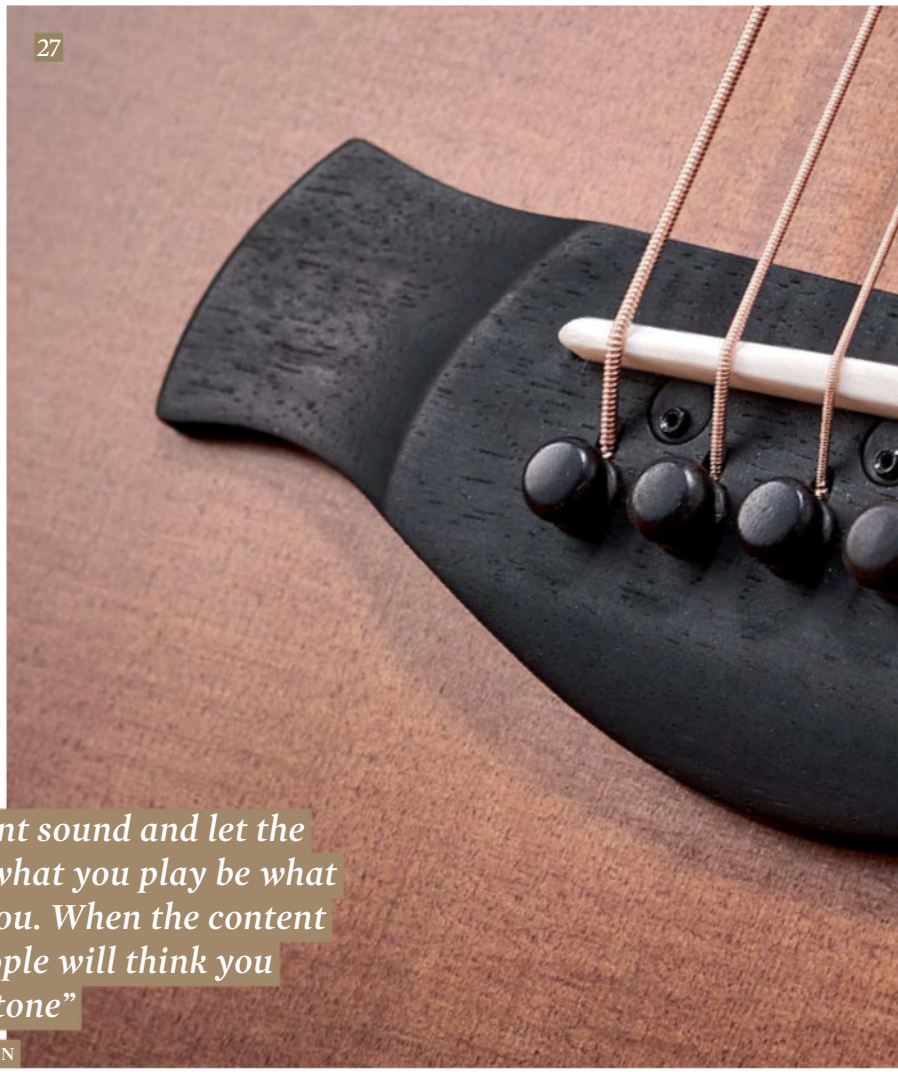


26 BRIDGE PINS

Acoustic guitars sound their best when the ball-ends of the strings are firmly anchored under the bridge plate. To achieve that, there must be a friction fit between the pins and the tapered pin holes in the bridge. With prolonged use, bridge pins become loose and at that point a new set of bridge pins may be necessary. Options include plastic, Tusq, bone, horn, wood and brass. All have different characteristics that may subtly modify and enhance tone, but the fit is paramount.

27 SADDLE SWAP

Saddles transmit string vibration into the top to set it in motion, so they're key to tone. The two important things to consider are the material and the fit. Most high-end acoustics come with bone saddles, which have excellent tonal characteristics. Cheaper guitars often have plastic or synthetic saddles, so an upgrade to bone or Tusq can be worthwhile. The bottom of the saddle should make perfect contact with the saddle slot and fit snugly to remain perfectly upright.



26. For bridge pins to do their job properly, a snug fit is necessary, but they can become worn over time

27. The humble saddle is one of the most tonally important parts of an acoustic guitar, transferring string vibration into the soundboard

28. Hand-carved braces, if crafted skilfully, accentuate desirable tonal attributes

"Get a decent sound and let the content of what you play be what identifies you. When the content is good, people will think you have great tone"

MARTY FRIEDMAN

DAN PATLANSKY

"One of the biggest things that hugely improved my tone was introducing an 'always-on' pedal to colour and very subtly drive my clean sound. Turning a tube amp up really loud is ideal, but it's usually not an option these days. So having a pedal that does a similar thing at a reasonable level is game-changing. I use either the Honey Bee Amps Clean Drive or the Mathis Audio Tech OD Texas Tone – both of these pedals do the job fantastically well because they are super low-gain drives. They don't sound like pedals when they're on but drive and colour the tone beautifully."

PRO TONE TIP

JOSH SMITH

"There is no substitute for volume/air and dynamics. I realised early on that the kind of improvisation I wanted to do required a tone that had a high amount of dynamic range and headroom. The ability to really use your hands for minor variance in tone and feel directly corresponds to the amount of compression in your signal. I immediately started treating compression as an effect to be used as such. It was the same thing with volume: the goal was never to just be loud but to be loud enough to be comfortable with my dynamics so that I can express myself with my playing."

28

28 BRACE SHAVING

Mass-production acoustics do not have individually voiced tops. If you have a solid wood acoustic that feels stiff and unresponsive, it's possible to get inside with a finger plane and carve the X-braces to free up the tone. Rear braces can also be finessed. Some of those solid-wood Chinese acoustics can be massively improved by this procedure, but this kind of work is always best left to a professional.

Andy Timmons is a tireless pilgrim on the tone trail, which has led him to develop signature gear such as this Compressor/Limiter by Carl Martin

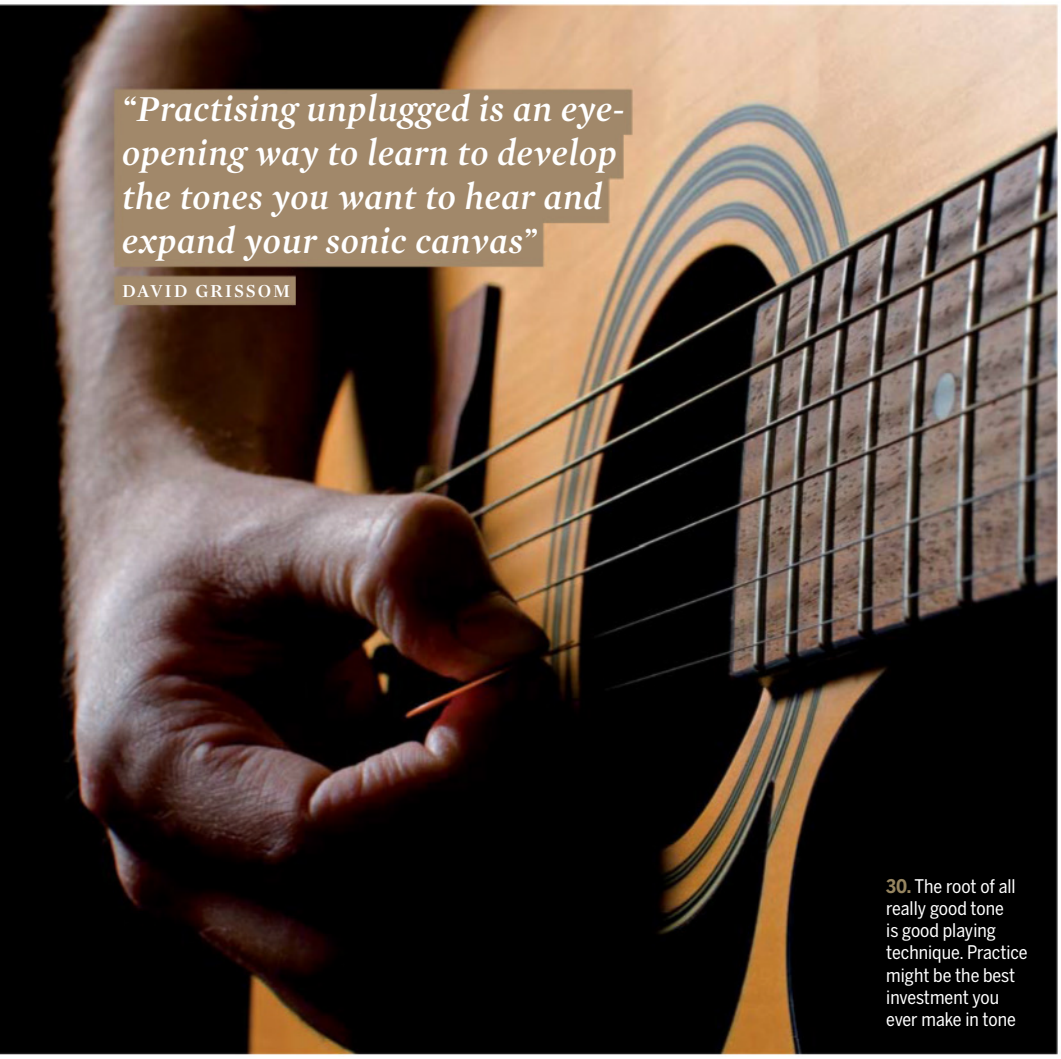
PRO TONE TIP

ANDY TIMMONS

"[Try using] the mantra of 'is this a great tone?', essentially refusing to 'settle' for an okay tone. At a certain point, particularly during the recording of my *Resolution* record, my co-producer/bassist Mike Daane and I went down multitudes of rabbit holes exploring our favourite recorded tones and striving to reach those benchmarks. I don't think we ever reached the goals, but that's the beauty of 'Tone Questing', the eternal search for better tone. You have to have an idea in your head – or in your ear! – of what tone you're trying to achieve and then you spend the time to get it to come through your fingers, through the instrument and through the gear you have at your disposal."

PHOTO BY TERESA JOLIE

29. A given set of strings won't have the same tonal effect on all guitars, so be sure to experiment until you get the formula right



"Practising unplugged is an eye-opening way to learn to develop the tones you want to hear and expand your sonic canvas"

DAVID GRISSOM

30. The root of all really good tone is good playing technique. Practice might be the best investment you ever make in tone

CARL VERHEYEN

"[Tone is] a very broad subject, so I'll scale it down to just Stratocaster distortion tones. First, I start with the neck pickup and get it to sound great through the amp. Then I do the same with the other four selections until all five pickup positions have a sweet semi-crunch tone. I go for a warm neck sound, a glassy middle pickup and a bright bridge tone. Next, I add my favourite soloing pedals and work with all five positions until I have the saturation I need to play fluidly. It's a lot to deal with at soundcheck, so I normally do it at home. Taking the time to maximise each tone is well worth it on the stage."

PHOTO BY SCOTT DUDELSON/GETTY IMAGES

29 STRING SWAP

Changing acoustic strings is like swapping pickups on an electric. Even if you have always preferred bronze strings, you might find that phosphor bronze actually sounds better on a particular guitar, or vice versa. Prior to the 1970s, acoustic players used Monel alloy strings, so for old-school tone check out Martin Retro strings. It's also worth considering round-core rather than hex-core, and remember that gauge affects tone as well as playability.

30 TIME TO PRACTISE!

We've left this one until last, but have you ever considered how much better your playing might be if all that time you've spent watching amp, pedal, pickup and guitar demos had been used for practising instead? Maybe that £300 you're about to splash on yet another set of underwhelming PAF replicas or that currently fashionable Tube Screamer clone might be better spent on getting some lessons. If pushed, most of us will admit that the ability to play fluently tends to enhance tone, so get better and you'll almost certainly sound better, too. G

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Guitarist

TOM VERLAINE

1949-2023

Following the death of Television's new wave icon in January, producer and influential ex-Bush guitarist Nigel Pulsford pays a personal tribute

Being asked to write a piece on Tom Verlaine just after his passing at the relatively young age of 73 is very daunting. It feels hard to write about a hero and I want to do him justice. Recently, we've also sadly lost Jeff Beck, Keith Levene and Wilko Johnson among others. In remembering guitar players, what is it that sparks a memory? Perhaps they played on your favourite song, inspired you to play, made you feel happy when you heard them – and maybe even made you consider giving up! The guitarists mentioned before were all unique and influenced what came after. Tom Verlaine easily sits among this group of players.

The first Television album, *Marquee Moon*, from 1977, was one of those rarities that seemed to come out of combining influences from far and wide to produce something unique. Those melodic musical sensibilities informed the chiming jagged guitar parts, while Tom's vocal delivery influenced the new wave stylings that followed their debut – from Gang Of Four to The Strokes, Sonic Youth to Pavement, The Smiths to REM.

Verlaine's lyric writing – fed by his poetic leanings, noirish film imagery and New York's steamy underbelly – granted the music a decidedly different, spooky dynamic: a sense of daring and a dramatic theatrical tinge bringing the written word into a shadowy half-light. There was no doubt that they were from the East Coast, which had produced the likes of The Velvet Underground, New York Dolls, Patti Smith and Suicide. Influences from further afield were also evident – The 13th Floor Elevators, The Byrds, The Grateful Dead, The Doors and Love, for example.

Tom had a Dylan-esque voice – quirky, not perfect and yet powerful and able to convey whatever the hell he was singing about (I wasn't always sure!), and his harrowing vibrato technique when his guitar took centre stage perfectly complemented his voice. A true original.

REALITY TELEVISION

It was a page-long review in the *New Musical Express* written by Nick Kent in 1977 that first drew me to Television. It wasn't easy to hear new music back then (although this was changing due to John Peel's newly adventurous selections) and so on the strength of this excitable review I cobbled together some pocket money and bought a copy of the *Marquee Moon* 12-inch single. Since I couldn't afford the actual album straightaway, that would have to do.

I was a little perplexed that the B-side – of what was the first 12-inch single I'd ever bought – had a mono version of the A-side. Any dismay was allayed by the sound of the dual-guitar attack of Television. The track *Marquee Moon* sounded like nothing else I'd heard at the time. Guitar one starts up playing a simple rhythmic figure; enter guitar two trilling away; bass, then drums follow and then Tom's manically intense vocal. It's stripped down yet musically full. The rhythm section is quite funky, laying down a dirty groove pushed along by the insistence of the rhythm guitars. Behind the noirish vocal, Richard Lloyd underlines the lyrics with bell-like licks. The instrumental bridge is beautiful, almost classical in its construction: rising and falling but, thank goodness, not prog-like.

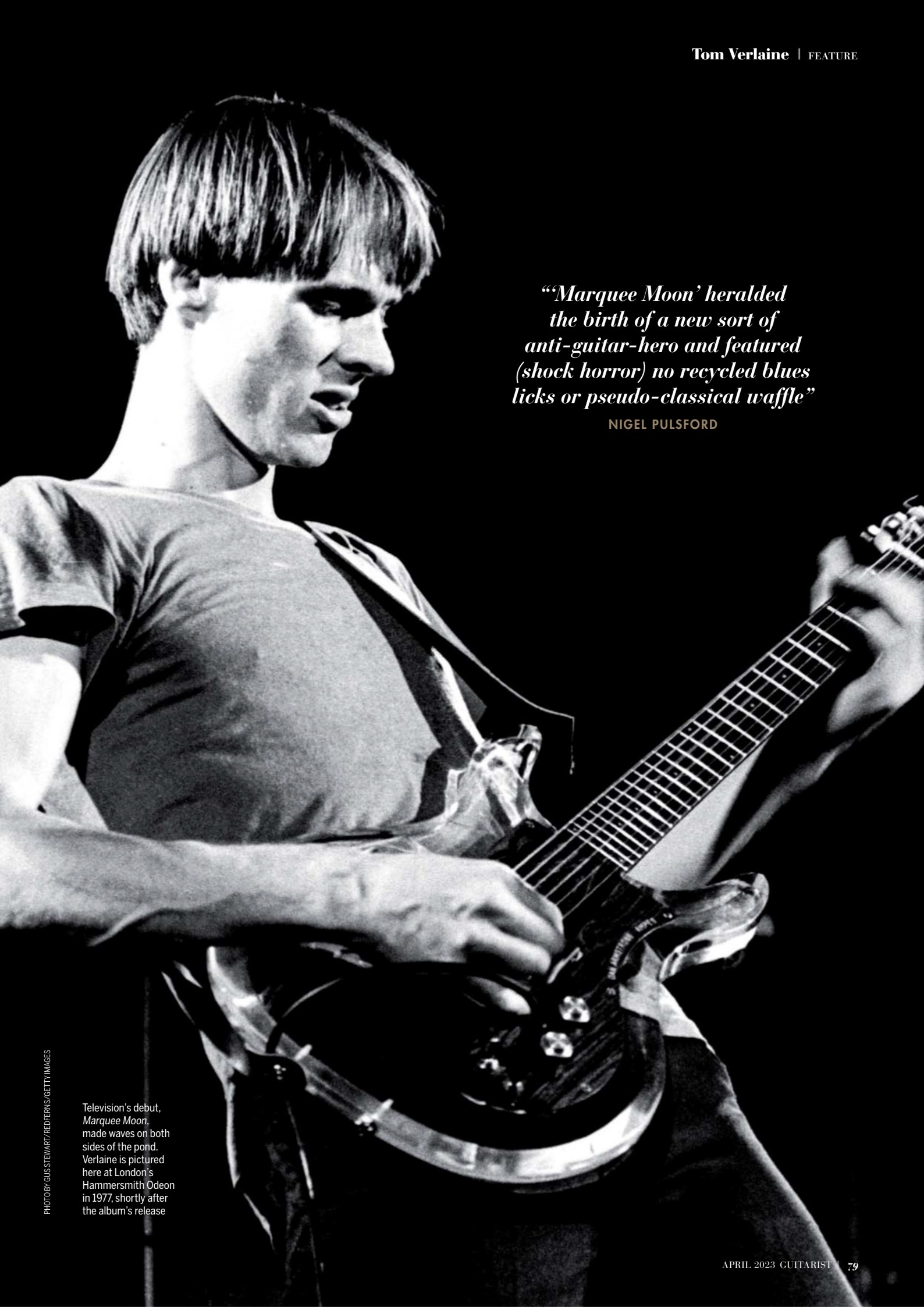
"Verlaine's lyric writing was fed by his poetic leanings, noirish film imagery and New York's steamy underbelly" **NIGEL PULSFORD**

PHOTO BY EBET ROBERTS/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

1. Tom Verlaine, born Thomas Miller, moved to New York City in the early 70s seeking poetry or music – and found both in Television when the band formed in 1973

After two verses and choruses we're into the guitar solos, which play with a wonderful freedom and tightly coiled energy. It's all tension and release. Never have Fender guitars sounded so perfect: clean and spiky with a weighty heft! The solos build to an extraordinary crescendo and then we're into a dreamy airy coda before the track kicks back in with a reprise of verse 1, and after 10 gripping revelatory minutes it's over. It's thrilling stuff and my teenage mind was truly blown.

For its intensity, the extended soloing reminded me of the long solos played by Neil Young, who had been my abiding passion for a



"'Marquee Moon' heralded the birth of a new sort of anti-guitar-hero and featured (shock horror) no recycled blues licks or pseudo-classical waffle"

NIGEL PULSFORD

PHOTO BY GUS STEWART/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Television's debut, *Marquee Moon*, made waves on both sides of the pond. Verlaine is pictured here at London's Hammersmith Odeon in 1977, shortly after the album's release

couple of years, but it was time for Neil to take a back seat as we've now got two sympatico guitar slingers making it even more exciting. Added to this is the way the band effortlessly accentuates the solos to create musical bliss: a wonderful storm to get swept away by! The guitar parts are beautifully orchestrated and clearly a lot of it was worked out before they recorded. It was, and still is, an amazing listen.

The rest of the album, which I got hold of later in the year, was as good, featuring more songs performed with flair and originality. Two new guitar heroes to add to the list. It was as good a debut album as anybody has ever released.

WORDS & PICTURES

Much is made of the interplay of Tom Verlaine and Richard Lloyd – and so it should be. They honed their craft at the now legendary CBGB's, a bit of a dump but the place to see a raft of exciting bands in New York in the mid-70s. It is their interplay I first think of when the band's name is mentioned. Back then, I didn't get too deeply into Tom's words, but with time it became apparent that Verlaine's words and idiosyncratic delivery were equally important, and taken at face value it seemed that he was reflecting a black-and-white cityscape, full of fragmented images of life, of wonder, of alienation. Poetic stories, very literary in construction, on the romantic edge of respectability.

Marquee Moon soon became very popular. It heralded the birth of a new sort of anti-guitar-hero and featured (shock horror) no recycled blues licks or pseudo-classical waffle. In fact, no rock clichés of the six-string variety were employed! It was exciting, vital music that meant something to me. More importantly, it was the first of the new music that allowed room for some sort of virtuosity – it suggested that technique wasn't bad. It gave me permission to carry on practising in my bedroom secure in the knowledge that I might be able to use some of what I learned to make some new music someday, although the blues licks were locked away for future use only in guitar shops.

PHOTO BY CHRIS MCKAY/GETTY IMAGES

2. Television's initial time together was brief, with the band breaking up in 1978 – and yet in 1992 they reformed and released their third and self-titled album, with tours following for well over a decade

POETRY IN MOTION

Tom Verlaine (Thomas Miller actually, but he, like his friend Patti Smith, loved poetry and adored the words of French poets Rimbaud and Verlaine and so we have the exotic Verlaine coupled with the straightforward Tom) was born in New Jersey in December 1949. He was a musical child, learning both the piano and later the saxophone, inspired by the more experimental players such as Albert Ayler and John Coltrane. This musicality informs his approach to the guitar, of which he was not initially a fan, and it was upon hearing The Rolling Stones that he was persuaded to pick up a guitar with the intention of developing his own style, not merely mimicking others as most young players naturally do.

"The band effortlessly accentuates the extended solos to create musical bliss: a wonderful storm to get swept away by!" **NIGEL PULSFORD**

At the same time, he was developing a love for poetry and literature, and he shared these dual passions with a school friend: Richard Hell. They ventured to New York City in the early 70s to pursue either music or poetry, eventually leading to the formation of Television, with Hell on bass. Verlaine supposedly kicked Hell out of the band later for his ineptness as a bass player and the classic Television line-up of Verlaine, Richard Lloyd on guitar, Fred Smith on bass and Billy Ficca (a school friend of Verlaine's) on drums came together in 1975. Two years later they recorded *Marquee Moon* with Andy Johns as engineer.

After an excellent but, of course, slightly anti-climactic second album, *Adventure*, Television broke up and Tom pursued a solo career, although *The Blow-Up*, an excellent live album recorded in 1978, was released in 1982.

His eponymous first album from 1979 displayed the sort of writing and angular guitar playing that was evident on the Television albums. The follow-up, the more expansive *Dreamtime*, was even better. He carried on releasing solo albums through the 90s and the early 2000s. Meanwhile, Television reformed in 1992 and released the quite brilliant *Television* (check out *Call Mr Lee*) and had toured on and off ever since, all over the world.

He leaves behind a strong legacy, and his time with Television in the 70s is a thing of wonder: one of those incredible collisions between four people that produces music of the highest level. He will be remembered fondly by guitar players around the world. I never met one whose eyes didn't light up when we got round to talking about Tom Verlaine!

Essential LISTENING

Television: *Marque Moon, Adventure, The Blow-Up, Television*
Tom Verlaine: *Tom Verlaine, Dreamtime, The Miller's Tale* (solo compilation)

"Never have Fender guitars sounded so perfect as on 'Marquee Moon': clean and spiky with a weighty heft!"

NIGEL PULSFORD

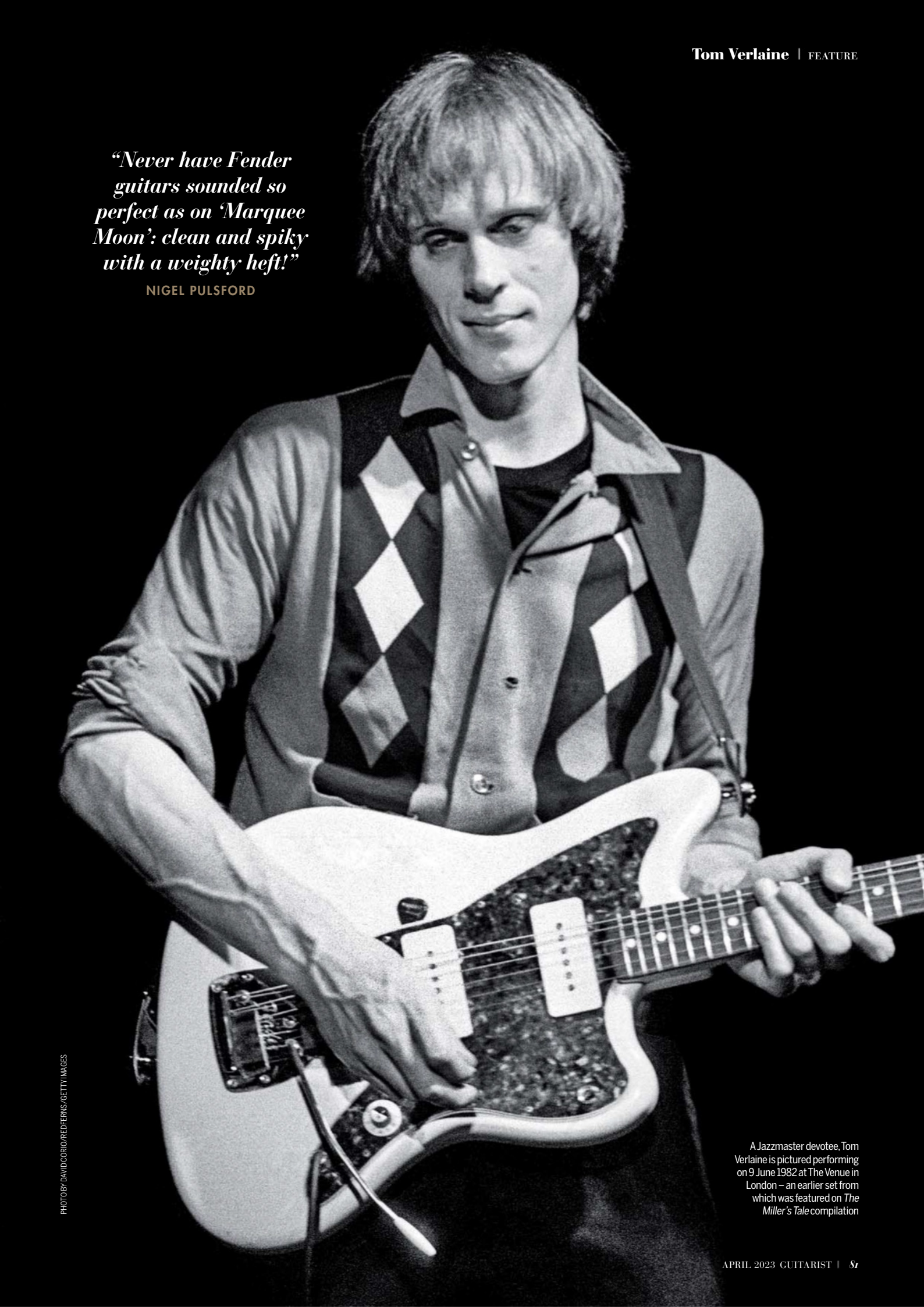


PHOTO BY DAVID CORIO/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

A Jazzmaster devotee, Tom Verlaine is pictured performing on 9 June 1982 at The Venue in London – an earlier set from which was featured on *The Miller's Tale* compilation

Sounds Of The 60s

Rapier launched in 2022 with the well-received 33 model. Can the 60s stylists hit the target again with these two new additions for this year?

Words Dave Burrluck
Photography Neil Godwin

SAFFIRE

RAPIER 22 & SAFFIRE £439 & £479

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What You Need To Know

1. **These look like 60s throwbacks...** That's pretty much what they are, except these are no vintage pieces; they're new interpretations based on the 'golden age' of British guitar making in the 1960s.

2. **Wasn't Rapier just a model?** Yes, as we explain later, the 'Rapier' brand name comes from the Watkins Rapier that appeared during the 60s in three-pickup (33), two-pickup (22) and even four-pickup (44) versions. The Saffire (originally the Sapphire) appeared later in the decade and shows the influence of Burns, another Brit legend, and actually features pickups modelled on the original Burns Tri-Sonic single coils.

3. **Are these guitars made in the UK?** No, not at these prices – they're crafted in China. These are very simple guitars in terms of construction, like the originals. Veteran designer Alan Entwistle is behind the new Rapier project and has brought a lot of his experience to the build quality, pickups and even, on the Saffire, a Varitone-style passive filter, the VTN-5.

Back in issue 480 we told the story of the new Chinese-made Rapier Guitar Company, the brainchild of veteran guitar designer Alan Entwistle whom many will know from his own retro-informed Revelation brand. The first Rapier guitar was a rather tidy re-run of a Brit-classic, the Watkins Rapier. While Watkins is still a going concern, Alan had noticed that the rights to the name Rapier had lapsed, so he acquired them and it became the brand name.

When we spoke to Alan for that review, he promised more models inspired by the considerable number made by Watkins – who, as the 60s progressed, changed the name on the headstocks to WEM and then Wilson. So, for 2023, we get a welcome left-handed version of that original 33, a two-pickup 22, and the Saffire 6 and 12, originally called the Sapphire. "Yes, Sapphire is registered by someone else in the music category. It caused a bit of a problem until I dug into my Shakespeare

2

THE RIVALS

The scarcity (and cost) of US Fenders in the early 60s led to numerous UK brands popping up. Not the case today, of course! Affordable vintage-style models such as Fender's Mexican Vintera range are more expensive: a classic '60s Stratocaster costs from £869; the more contemporary Player series Strat is £669. The Rapiers are more on par price-wise with Squier – the Classic Vibe range is mostly under £400 and the 40th Anniversary series is around £459.

If retro throwbacks are your style, check out Eastwood, plus its Dennis Fano-designed Rivolta range. Danelectro still produces versions of original designs, and Harley Benton has recently jumped on the Mosrite-style bandwagon.

and found a spelling of sapphire but with two 'f's, so we went with that."

The prices might be low, but the build of our review 22 and Saffire 6 models is very tidy and offers some expanded sounds. The 22 is the more straightforward drive with its pair of EWR64 mini-humbuckers, a standard three-way toggle switch selector and a bass-cut switch for each pickup, but the new Saffire shoots for a standard three-single-coil setup with five-way lever selector and then adds a

1. These silver foil mini-humbuckers are used on the Rapier 33 that was introduced last year. The bridge DCR is 7.03kohms; the neck 5.5k

2. The simple Hi Lo vibrato was re-engineered from an original Watkins vibrato. It's not adjustable but gives good performance, along with that roller saddle bridge

heavily radiused. Under the opaque finish is okoume, a lightweight mahogany-style wood that Alan prefers over more usual woods such as basswood. The neck is pretty standard, too, except here the Canadian maple is actually quarter-sawn with some light flame and flecked figuring to the back. Although the 305mm (12-inch) radius fingerboard is quoted as being rosewood, its light brown colour and grain would suggest otherwise. Medium-gauge frets are very well installed – the fret slots are filled on the

3. The headstock outline is pretty generic and all the Rapier guitars use a zero fret and string guide, rather than a more common top nut

The 22 has 60s power-pop aplenty. Nastier, snappier blues leads are right here, too, and we'd love to set this one up for slide

five-way rotary ATN-5 switch for some additional passive tone mangling.

Construction style is based on the Fender blueprint, as it always was – simple slab bodies with no comfort contouring – and because the vibrato is top-loading there's none of the more complex routing of a Stratocaster to worry about.

The 22's body is thinner than the Fender standard at 39mm, but the body edges are

3

UNDER THE HOOD

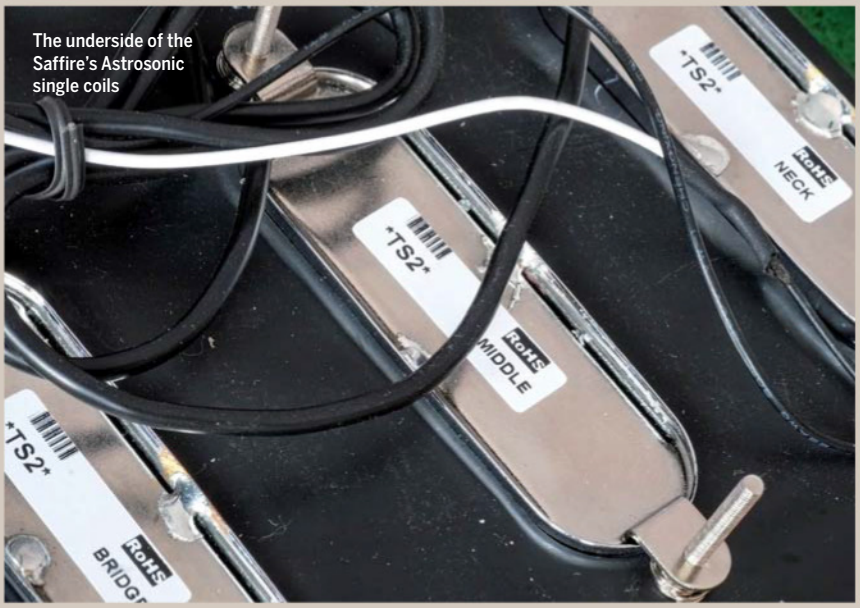
Lots of screws to remove, but what's inside these 60s throwbacks?

You can't expect boutique pickups and wiring, but Rapier has certainly managed to cram quite a bit in here in terms of both the pickup designs and the wiring. Removing the scratchplate of the Saffire – to which all the pickups, controls and switches are mounted – reveals a swimming pool rout underneath. The mini-pots are 250k, with a linear taper for the volume and an audio (log) taper for the tone control that uses a standard .047µF green Mylar cap. Each pickup looks very cleanly made and not only has those chrome covers but a chromed magnetic baseplate, too – these are switched from a block-style five-way lever switch. There's no origin label on the pickup bases, just a 'TS2' designation and 'bridge', 'middle' and 'neck' legends.

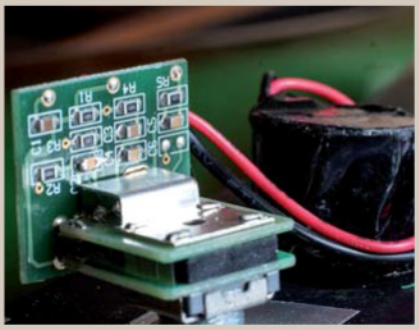
The ATN-5 is particularly neat, mounted to that five-position switch with some 10 surface-mount resistors and capacitors, and the necessary small coil or 'choke' that's mounted next to it. There is a small 'artecsounds.com' legend on the PCB, presumably the origin of the circuit.

As with the three-pickup 33 model, the Rapier 22 has a swimming pool rout and here the mini-pots are 500k, again linear volumes and an audio taper tone control that here has a lighter-value 153 code .015µF cap. The pickups here have no ID labels, just brass bases, and those bass-cut switches are simple two-position push-switches each using a 102 code .001µF capacitor in series.

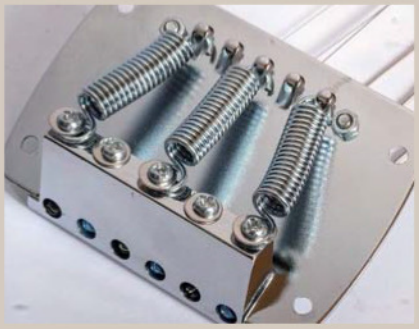
While we have the guitar disabled, we remove the vibrato – a very simple affair with three small springs counterbalancing the string tension. There's no adjustment and it's designed to work with 0.009- and 0.010-gauge strings, although you can get two more springs from JHS should you want to install heavier gauge strings or have the arm sitting lower with presumably a tighter feel.



The underside of the Saffire's Astrosonic single coils



The ATN-5 passive tone filter, which features on the Saffire model, is surprisingly hi-tech looking



Based on the original Watkins vibrato, the new Hi Lo vibrato is dead simple but works rather well

sides and the fingerboard's top edges are nicely rolled – and the entire neck is clear-gloss finished. As we said in our review of the original Rapier 33, that zero fret might be a retro step too far: the 'nut' is simply a string guide, and any wear over the zero fret in time will no doubt impair the tuning stability. That said, the re-engineered Hi Lo vibrato, with its roller-saddle tune-o-matic style bridge, is a simple and neat unit that's not designed to dive-bomb, just for a little 60s shimmer.

The Saffire comes across as a more upmarket piece with a slightly larger body that's a little thicker, too, at 42mm, which impacts on the weight. Then we get the larger two-piece scratchplate with its nod to another 60s classic, Burns. As you can see, the neck almost looks like it should be glued in. It's way less 'Fender' with a crisply bound fingerboard, a little darker in colour than the 22's, with large block inlays and that slightly oversized three-a-side headstock, which is spliced on under the first two frets.

Feel & Sounds

Both our samples are pretty light: the 22 weighs in at 3.15kg (6.93lb), the Saffire at 3.55k (7.81lb). The neck shaping is good, a mainstream and quite full-feeling 'C'. The 22's is actually marginally deeper with a measurement of 22mm at the 1st fret and 23.8mm at the 12th, as opposed to the Saffire's 21.8mm/23.2mm. It's close and our callipers tell us the 22's neck is very slightly wider: 43.8mm at the nut and 53.4mm at

4. In more upmarket Burns style, the Saffire model boasts a bound fingerboard edge with large block inlays

5. These Entwistle Astrosonic single coils are based on the very early Burn Tri-Sonic designs, quite different from the later models that Brian May put on his Red Special

6. This unusual 60s-inspired neck finish is only found on the Saffire. Both necks have a good 'soft C' profile, the fingerboard radius is 305mm (12 inches) and the fretwork is very tidy

7. The three-a-side headstock (not to mention the fingerboard details) suggests a glued-in neck guitar, but the Saffire is bolt-on like the other Rapier models

There's a rich seam to be mined in terms of lesser-known pickup designs and passive tone circuits

the 12th, whereas the Saffire measures 43mm at the nut and 52.9mm at the 12th. Minor differences aside, both feature good fretwork from a medium-gauge wire that's actually slightly wider and taller on the 22. Setups are good, too, and even with some waggle from that simple vibrato (which has a rather Jazzmaster 'soft' feel), the tuning stability is perfectly good.

Listening acoustically to the pair there's more Jazzmaster-like resonance to the Saffire and you'll notice that there's more 'dead' string behind the bridge than on the 22. With pretty similar bridge heights, it also means there's a lower back angle to that portion of the strings on the Saffire.

Plugging in the 22, the neck pickup's voice is quite rich and warm though not overthick, a perfectly good, jazzier start with plenty of more cranked blues-wail potential. The bridge is quite contrasting; it's obviously brighter and thinner but also a little underpowered, a sort of smoother Tele style. In the middle position with slight volume reduction on the neck, this gives a wide and surprisingly big jangly voice. There's 60s power-pop aplenty, too, but if you're into nastier, snappier blues leads, then it's right here and this writer would love to set one of these up for slide. Those bass-cut switches thin the sound quite a bit and drop the volume, something that works with both pickups on better than on the individual pickups, especially the bridge. But you can experiment with only cutting one pickup, and you have dual volumes to play with, too.

The Saffire's pickups look like single coils that have been on the pies. Yet while they sound like big single coils, there's a very slight out-of-phase character to the tone along with a little midrange nose, especially at the bridge. The pickup mixes don't have the classic sparkle, either – they're slightly softer. So while there are some pretty characterful big cleans, these pickups also like some grit, from fuzzes to (dare we say) pretty gritty classic rock gain. The ATN-5 passive filter gives you four more options that progressively thin the sound, but to our ears this is in a more usable way than the simple on/off bass-cut switches of the 22 – think of them as rhythm textures. We'd love to get recording with this Saffire and we suspect the ATN-5 really comes into its own on the 12-string: strumtastic!

8. The simple volume and tone, plus a five-way lever switch, are augmented on the Sapphire by the five-way rotary ATN-5 passive filter placed on the bass-side shoulder

Verdict

Many of us don't want different sounds, we're more interested in nailing the classics. And yet the surprise here is the amount of diversity to be found in that humbucker-meets-single coil zone, which might be more than useful for the creative player, at least on the Saffire. While we don't like pigeonholing, it's part of the job, and after some considerable test time we can't help thinking that the 22 comes across as a rather good 'dirty blues' guitar, while the its stablemate the Saffire might be your best friend if you're working in 60s or more modern Britpop-based styles: a tonal bundle of Burns, Gretsch and Rickenbacker, or certainly hints in those directions.

> As with the Rapier 33, it's the simple, functional quality that impresses us – it's clear someone cares about the end user

But as with the Rapier 33 we looked at last year, it's the simple, functional quality that impresses us here. There's little wrong with the craft, and on the evidence of the setup alone, it's clear someone cares about the end user. The character is the trump card here and perhaps a reminder that there's a rich seam to be mined in terms of lesser-known – in some cases forgotten – pickup designs and passive tone circuits. G

RAPIER 22

PRICE: £439
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric bolt-on
BODY: Okoume
NECK: Canadian maple, soft 'C' profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/43.8mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, pearloid dot markers, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium, plus larger gauge zero fret
HARDWARE: Original-style Rapier Hi Lo vibrato with roller saddle tune-o-matic-style bridge, Wilkinson die-cast tuners – chromed-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Alan Entwistle EWR64 mini-humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector, 2x slide switch (bass-cut for each pickup), individual pickup volume controls, master tone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.15/6.93
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: Along with the new Saffire there's the 3-pickup Rapier 33 (£479)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model, only Rapier 33 in Fiesta Red (£449)
FINISHES: Daphne Blue (as reviewed), Fiesta Red, 3 Tone Sunburst, Artic White – all gloss including neck back and headstock

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Tidy, simple build; excellent playability; neck; weight; simple, stable vibrato; mini-humbuckers

CONS We'd prefer a standard nut over the zero fret; a less extreme bass-cut might be more useful

RAPIER SAFFIRE

PRICE: £479
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric bolt-on
BODY: Okoume
NECK: Canadian maple, soft 'C' profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/43mm
FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood, pearloid block markers, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium, plus larger gauge zero fret
HARDWARE: Original-style Rapier Hi Lo vibrato with roller saddle tune-o-matic-style bridge, Wilkinson die-cast tuners – chromed-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm
ELECTRICS: 3x Alan Entwistle Astrosonic single coils, 5-way lever pickup selector, master volume and tone controls, plus ATN-5 5-position rotary frequency shift control
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.55/7.81
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The hardtail Rapier Saffire 12 (£549) comes in Sunburst, Vintage White and Greenburst
LEFT-HANDERS: No, see Rapier 22
FINISHES: Greenburst (as reviewed), 3-Tone Sunburst, Vintage White – all gloss including neck back and headstock

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Tidy build; playability and neck shape; characterful 'big' single-coil sounds expanded by the ATN control; good weight

CONS We'd prefer a standard nut, but it's not a dealbreaker

Guitarist GEAR OF THE YEAR

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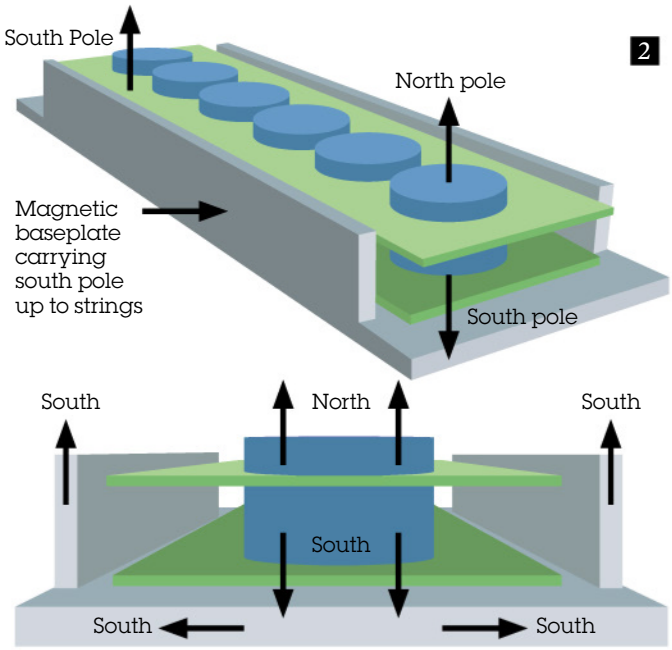
Forgotten Gems

Our obsession with PAF humbuckers and Fender single coils means many pickup designs from the 50s and 60s have long been lost

Words Dave Burrluck



1. Alan Entwistle is the designer and pickup expert behind the Rapier brand, and a veteran of the guitar industry

2. These two schematics shows the 'folding field' concept of the Saffire 6's Astrosonic single coils. Alan Entwistle explains: "The central magnet (blue cylinder) has its north pole facing the strings, while its south pole rests on the steel magnetic baseplate. The south magnetic field is then carried around the baseplate to its edges (which are also the pickup's locating lugs). This whole north-south field then surrounds and saturates the pickup's coil (not pictured) – thus we have a 'folding field'"

While the Rapier 22's mini-humbuckers are a pretty standard humbucking design, designer Alan Entwistle shares some additional info with us: "Each coil uses a steel blade polepiece and a ceramic bar magnet, and they're wound with 44 AWG wire." Meanwhile, the Saffire's Astrosonic single coils are "based on the earliest version of the Burns Tri-Sonic pickup, which would have been around 1959/1960," says Alan.

"They used six Alnico magnets – they called them 'Alcamax' but it's the same difference – but it was a nightmare to produce," he adds. "I think [Burns] went on making them for a few years and then when they went on to produce models such as the short-scale Jazz Guitar [which was in production from 1962 to '65] they thought, 'Let's make a simpler version.' This was the bar magnet version, which was always considered as a 'lesser' product. In actual fact, that was the one Brian May used [on the Red Special] and that was it – end of story!

"These types of pickups utilise what I call a 'folding field' concept. The cylindrical magnets are mounted on a magnetic baseplate so that one polarity is facing the strings directly, while its opposite polarity is in direct contact with the baseplate, which, being magnetic, then carries the field completely around the coils. It also ends up sensing the strings, but to a lesser degree than the Alnico polepiece head. That's why you have a pickup that is slightly out of phase with itself, and that's how you get that somewhat nasal, singing quality

> "The pickup is slightly out of phase with itself [so] you get a nasal, singing quality" ***Alan Entwistle***

from this type of pickup. Many people tend to think that the Tri-Sonic sound comes from its bobbin-less construction, but this is really somewhat erroneous because such a coil is not quite as efficient as a bobbin-wound coil. The magnetic baseplate is the really crucial factor here.

"Burns did not invent the 'folding field' concept," Alan continues. "It is evident on some 'dog-ear' P-90s and also some Supro and Framus pickups from the 1950s. It's even present on the earliest Watkins Rapiers from around 1958, but these have a really unusual magnetic system. The keeper plate on the Fender Jaguar pickup is a similar idea, but it has a large hole in the base of the keeper to reduce the magnetic effect a little more – [the magnets] don't actually sit on the plate. Perhaps they tried it as a straight plate and thought it sounded a little too nasal. I don't know. It's an excellent pickup either way.

"A lot of people have suggested that some of these earlier pickup designs were a kind of accident, but I don't think so. I mean, why was the Burns pickup called a Tri-Sonic? I'm not sure these people have received enough credit."

Today, of course, these 'antique' designs have to be made in Eastern Asia to achieve the price point. "It's a factory I use up in North Eastern China, near Qingdao," says Alan. "It's a fairly small factory actually, but, honestly, I've tried many of the main pickup companies and these were the only ones who keep to the specs I give them. That even includes the amount of waxing [potting] I do. Unless I'm doing a high-output pickup, I don't use a vacuum wax

3. Rapier's first solidbody, which was released in 2022, focuses on the original three-pickup Watkins Rapier 33 from the early 60s

4. The Saffire 6 and 12 are the first of the new repros to feature these Astrosonic single coils as opposed to the Entwhistle EWR64 mini-humbuckers of the 33 and 22 models

process; I use a higher viscosity wax that is slightly microphonic. A pickup is only as good as the specs you give to them."

Alan notes that the original Sapphire models never had Burns Tri-Sonics on them: "They had a pickup that was similar to the [original] Rapier 33's but was internally different. I just thought something 'Tri-Sonic-ish' would work and look really right."

The initial Sapphire models didn't use Alan's ATN-5 design, either, which dates back to the mid-80s. Alan explains: "Basically, the ATN is a Varitone, but the specs are different. There's a coil in there that measures about 3kohms and there's a steel slug through that. The rotary switch is mounted direct to a board, and it's a series of resistors and capacitors – the resistors are mainly there to prevent it going 'click' as you change positions.

"The first position [fully clockwise] is a bypass," he continues. "It's quite subtle but does become more dramatic if you back off your volume control slightly. So if you select bridge and middle, and move the ATN back [anti-clockwise] one or two positions, it begins to sound like an electro-acoustic and can get very jangly – it really suits the 12-string Saffire, too."

Living The Dream

Taylor describes its American Dream guitars as "spartan and minimalist" by design, but does this add up to any shortcomings in tone? Let's find out

Words David Mead
Photography Olly Curtis

TAYLOR AMERICAN DREAM AD12E-SB £2,159

CONTACT **Taylor Guitars** PHONE **00800 23750011** WEB **www.taylorguitars.com**

What You Need To Know

1 Tell us more about this series.
Taylor's American Dream guitars are essentially stripped-back, no-frills instruments made from solid woods and voiced to give an optimum sound capability. So not having much in the way in terms of elaborate inlays, arm rests and other bells and whistles helps keep the price down and the bang-for-buck quotient up.

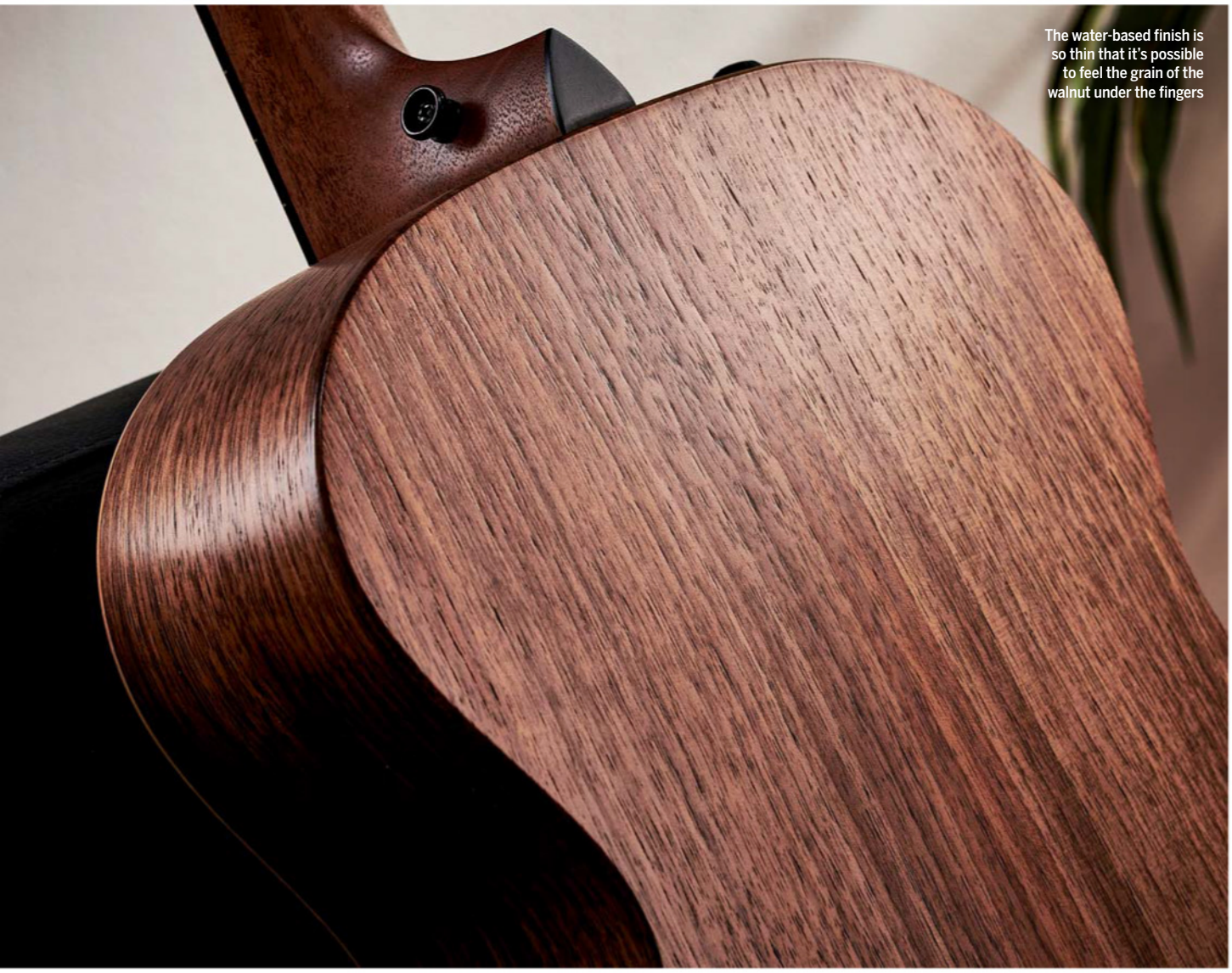
2 Is walnut a good tonewood, then?
Indeed it is, and its use is becoming more and more commonplace in acoustic guitars. Sonically, it falls somewhere between the majestic warmth of Indian rosewood and the sweet, trebly bite of maple. Taylor also claims that walnut's midrange becomes more pronounced as it's played in.

3 And eucalyptus for a fingerboard?
This is definitely a conservationist move as some species of rosewood and ebony are not only endangered but also expensive to use. Eucalyptus is right at the other end of the spectrum – it's not endangered, and it's widely available and hard-wearing. So totally fit-for-purpose as fingerboard material.

Taylor's American Dream Series has been expanded with a trio of sunburst finished models, comprising the Grand Concert AD12e we have before us plus the small-bodied Grand Theater AD11e and the Grand Pacific AD17e. All three have the same basic spec with Sitka spruce tops and walnut backs and sides, and boast uncompromising solid wood quality and tone at a stripped-down price point. This means that any ornate trappings you may expect to find on upmarket acoustics have been put aside in favour of what Taylor describes as "all the projection, sustain and tonal depth a player would expect from a Taylor, presented in a thoughtfully distilled form that makes premium craftsmanship accessible to more players".

We've been mightily impressed by other instruments from the American Dream Series in the past, the AD27 Flametop with solid maple top, back and sides in particular. Many of the models in the range now include chief designer and CEO Andy Powers' revolutionary V-Class bracing system that promises increased volume, sustain and consistency of tone all over the fretboard. Whereas players may have been wary of any new bracing system that seems to overwrite the more established

1. The AD12e's top wood is Sitka spruce, a traditional timber used by many manufacturers across the globe



The water-based finish is so thin that it's possible to feel the grain of the walnut under the fingers

X-bracing as *the* optimum tone engine, our experience is that it definitely marks a step forward in acoustic guitar engineering.

In short, we like what we've heard so far and so expectations were high when we unzipped the AD12e's very swanky AeroCase. First impressions were that we were scratching our heads trying to figure out exactly where Taylor had made the cost cuts that keep this particular model hovering around the £2k price point. The finish is matt, as opposed to high gloss, and the furnishings that go hand in hand with upper-echelon acoustics – like ornate abalone inlays and such – are conspicuous in their absence. But, to be absolutely honest, you don't miss them. The whole ethos of the American Dream Series is that everything here is as good as it needs to be in order to produce the best possible instrument at a fundamental level, but without the need to compromise on the end result, which is governed by great tone and eminent playability.

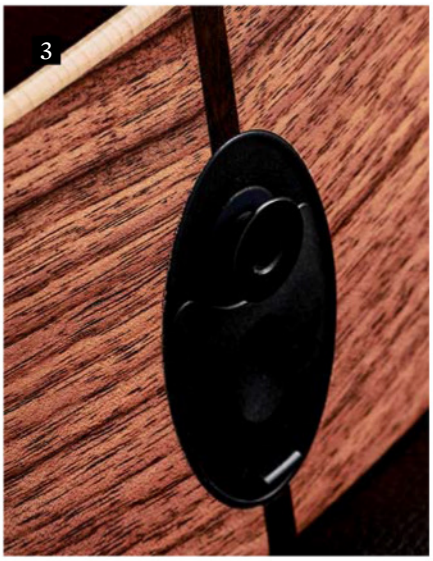
That thin sunburst finish works its charms – we felt like we were more in contact with the woods

So what exactly is on offer here? We go into some depth with regards to the reasoning behind the actual choice of woods and so on in our interview with Andy Powers that follows this review. But, for now, the top is made from Sitka spruce, which has a proven track record as a premium wood for guitar tops. Back and sides are walnut, a wood that we're seeing more and more regularly on acoustics as the more traditional timbers such as rosewood and mahogany become more scarce and expensive to use – not to mention in many cases endangered and CITES-listed. Taylor says that walnut offers "crisp highs,

THE RIVALS

If you're aiming at spending around £2k on an acoustic and a sunburst finish is a must, then you should take a peek at Eastman's catalogue. Its E20ss/v (around £1,599) looks very similar to the Taylor E12e, although you're getting an Adirondack spruce and Indian rosewood combo, as opposed to walnut/Sitka, as well as an antiqued lacquer finish. The Eastman E40 OM (£2,403) is another one to check out.

Martin's sunburst range means a step up in price, with a 000-28 at £3.8k, for instance. Yamaha has plenty of sunbursts in its catalogue, many at the other end of the price spectrum. Check out the L Series with prices starting at around £479. There's the Guild M40 Troubadour at the £1.8k price point, and let's not forget Gibson's redoubtable J-45, which would set you back around £2,479.



2. The hand-applied sunburst finish is neatly offset by a firestripe pickguard and simple black and white rosette

3. The Expression System 2's battery compartment is stowed away under the strap pin/jack socket at the guitar's base

Strumming, the sound is well balanced with a warmth due to the presence of walnut

balanced by a deep, woody low-end that emerges as the guitar is played in..." and it sits in between mahogany and maple on the tonal spectrum.

The guitar's neck is made from "neo-tropical mahogany" and the fingerboard is "smoked eucalyptus". The former is scarf-jointed just below the headstock and, yes, while this would flag a cost-cutting manoeuvre, a lot of luthiers tell us that this makes the headstock stronger and less likely to fracture in an accidental knock. The latter is a new term to us – and one of the questions we raised with Andy in our interview – but we gather that the "smoked" part of the equation is the fact that it has the colour of a dark rosewood but a tight grain similar to ebony. Once again, if no-one had drawn our attention to the fact that it was neither of the more traditional aforementioned woods, we probably wouldn't have batted an eye. Meanwhile, the headstock veneer is, once again, eucalyptus and the tuners that sit either side are matt-black coloured and Taylor branded.

It's a good-looking guitar. The tobacco sunburst – which is hand sprayed, we're told – has been very nicely applied and the faux tortoiseshell firestripe pickguard sets it off magnificently. The rosette is a simple black/maple/black configuration and the bridge saddle is micarta with black plastic string pegs.

The 'board has Italian acrylic "faux pearl" position markers, 20 perfectly positioned medium frets and a 44.5mm (1.75-inch) black Tusq nut that sits astride the fretboard down at the campfire chords end.

4. The headswtock veneer is eucalyptus, which matches the fretboard

5. Even though Taylor describes its American Dream guitars as "spartan and minimalist" the sound is, in contrast, full and vibrant

One extra feature worthy of note is the chamfered edges to the soundboard – so no sharp edges to dig into the arm during long playing sessions. It's a nice touch and adds to the whole tactile experience that this particular instrument has on offer.

Feel & Sounds

So does a guitar with such basic accoutrements yield a basic sound? Quite the opposite. We were surprised at the quality of sound that came from our first investigative chord strumming. The sound we heard was well balanced, with no ungainly mud in the bass or brittleness in the trebles, with a full spectrum of frequencies and, most of all, a warmth that was undoubtedly due to the presence of walnut and the guitar's overall thin finish. Taylor says that the walnut's tonal influence will improve and evolve once the guitar is played in and, to be honest, if it gets much better than this then we'd be delighted.

Another point to mention is that once we had initially tuned the AD12e it held onto its tuning throughout the time we spent with it. This is another credit to Taylor's emphasis on workmanship – there's been no cost-cutting where hardware is concerned. A perfectly cut nut and tuners that do their job more than adequately reinforce the American Dream ideal: quality performance and top-class workmanship without any unnecessary bling to tempt players into buying with their eyes rather than their ears.

Venturing up the neck resulted in no tonal black holes at all; everything remained well balanced and very musical

The neck is a very comfortable Goldilocks experience: not too big, not too slim. And once again the thin finish works its charms as we felt as though we were more in contact with the woods. It's a tactile thing that's difficult to describe, but the result was a guitar that was difficult to put down.

The straightforward controls for the ES2 preamp are soft-touch volume, bass and treble

Another thing we watch out for in instruments that sit in established manufacturers' 'budget ranges' is how all the money has been spent getting a good sound down at the nut, where, let's face it, most players spend the bulk of their time. Wandering up the neck often means a lack of body and a set of diminishing returns as far as sweetness and warmth are concerned. Not so with the AD12e. Venturing up the neck resulted in no tonal black holes at all; everything remained well balanced and very musical. This is very probably due to the V-Class bracing pattern – as we've found on other models that have this system in place – that we're in for a very even tonal experience all over the playing area. Volume, too, is very good. Everything from a gentle brush to full-on enthusiastic strumming gave us a great return.

The AD12e comes equipped with Taylor's Expression System 2 pickup/preamp, a reliable workhorse that features on even top-of-the-range instruments. Its no-fuss soft-touch controls preside over your plugged-in sound with centre-indented volume, treble and bass rotaries that sit out of the way on the side of the guitar's upper bout near the neck joint. As ever, when we powered up the AD, it performed faultlessly and gave us a workable electric sound within moments.

Verdict

As you can probably tell, we share Andy Powers' enthusiasm for Taylor's American Dream instruments and would go so far as to say that we haven't played a bad one. The AD12e is no exception. Its cut-back minimalist look has an aesthetic all its own, and its tone and playability make it a sure-fire winner that could ably compete with instruments further up the range in terms of price. We fully endorse Andy's opinion that the American Dream guitars are as reliable as "a cup of black coffee" in that they simply get the job done with an absolute minimum amount of fuss. Seek them out – you might just find your own dream instrument. G

TAYLOR AMERICAN DREAM AD12E-SB

PRICE: £2,159 (inc AeroCase)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Grand Concert
TOP: Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Walnut
MAX RIM DEPTH: 111mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 381mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 632mm (24.9")
TUNERS: Satin black enclosed
NUT/WIDTH: Black Tusq/44.5mm
FINGERBOARD: Eucalyptus
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Eucalyptus/57mm
ELECTRICS: Expression System 2
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.64/3.62
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: There are 2 other models available with a walnut/Sitka/sunburst combo: the AD11e-SB (£2,039) and the AD17e-SB (£2,159). Taylor's American Dream Series has a host of other wood types and body sizes on offer, see website for details
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, to order
FINISH: Matt

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS A superbly well-conceived instrument with a no fuss aesthetic and great tonal range

CONS Purists may not go for the spartan appointments

California Dreamin'

Taylor's chief designer, president and CEO, Andy Powers, talks us through the choice of body woods for the AD12e

Words David Mead

As you can probably tell from the enthusiastic response in the review that precedes this feature, we were very impressed by the Taylor AD12e. And this is something that we share with Andy: "You know, it feels almost like I want to tell a secret or something," he confides, "but I really like it, too! For what that guitar costs, the amount of musical instrument that you get is really good." We couldn't agree more. It's a guitar that works on so many levels. But we're curious to know about the choice of timbers used in the guitar and how the American Dream Series fits into Taylor's catalogue.

Andy Powers is enthusiastic about the new sunburst models: "I love the character, I love the way it looks, I love the way it makes me feel"

What's the ethos behind the American Dream Series as a whole?

"It was actually born out of the pandemic. I looked around and went, 'Okay, if I don't have anything that I want, I don't have the materials that come in from all over the globe, I have hardly anything in a time of uncertainty. What do I really need? What are the essentials? This isn't a time for filigree and frills and elaborate aesthetics, this is a time to just focus on the basics – let's get the job done. What's the job? The job is to make a great-playing instrument, a great-sounding instrument that delivers for a musician.'

"[This is] your cup of black coffee. It's gonna get you up and going. And it's not fancier than that"

"Right? That's why I describe it as your cup of black coffee. This is gonna get you up and going. And it's not fancier than that. We would go through our warehouse until we found orphaned wood. What is that wood? It is material that didn't make the ultra-high aesthetic standards that we would use in a specific series. But we'd see these other materials that are perfectly functional for building great instruments, but maybe they didn't fit within a certain criteria visually. Okay, well, I can still build a guitar out of that. And it's going to be a great functioning guitar long after I'm dead and gone. Okay, that's a great thing to do. Let's do it. And so that's how it started."

Were you surprised by how well the American Dream Series guitars were received by players?

"Yes, we found that musicians responded so well to the spartan appointments – the minimalism of the guitars – that it provided its own inspiration. And so, in a way, it was almost like they weren't distracted by the ornamentation of the guitar, or the precious materials that it was made from, or anything like that. They were inspired by the simplicity of the design and the simplicity of the construction method. At the same time, they were inspired by the dynamic character of the voice. So once things started to get back in motion for us, we realised that it might have been a guitar that we made for the era, but it's certainly not a guitar we wanted to give up.

"So once I set about sourcing material specifically for these guitars, I thought, 'Well, what do I want to do? What would be the right character for this guitar?' So its position has kind of evolved from the time that I first thought of it, to what it's turned into. Now, there's just a little more room for some ornamentation. We're doing this beautiful sunburst finish [on the AD11, 12 and 17] that I love. I love the character of the guitar, I love the way it looks, I love the way it makes me feel."

If we can look at the individual components of these guitars in terms of their body woods, why did you choose walnut for the backs and sides?

"It's a tonewood that I've always loved. But typically, when we use it, we're going to look for the one per cent or less that has an ultra-dramatic figure and colour in it. Because that's the presentation-grade version of that material. A lot of times, that's what guitar makers would assume is most appropriate for a guitar. But the

The sunburst trio of (left to right) the AD12, 17 and 11 present the next stage of the American Dream Series where we find a little more ornamentation

reality is, if I want to talk about dependable, reliable and a great-performing tonewood, man, that's it. That stuff sounds awesome, functions really well, sounds really great and it behaves well when you build the guitar. So we started going, 'Well, here's a widespread domestic wood that looks great, sounds great and is going to serve a musician very, very well.'"

How does walnut age sonically, in your experience?

"If we need a reference point, it reminds me of mahogany in that it becomes sweeter sounding, the older it becomes. At the same time, it has this dry character but maybe with a little more of the sparkle of koa. The walnut shares some of that and, because it is a little more dense than a piece of mahogany typically is, you hear a little more midrange, but it behaves almost equally in the whole frequency spectrum. But there's a little more of a bell-like character when you strike the note and so you get a little more high-fidelity sound out of it."

> "If I want to talk about a reliable and great-performing tonewood, man, walnut is it"

What about using eucalyptus as a fingerboard material?

"This particular eucalyptus is actually a farmed material, raised specifically for woodworking purposes, coming out of Spain and Portugal. Then it's what they call 'fumed'. So you're using this unique kiln and ammonia processing treatment to deliberately react with the tannic acid that's native in a piece of wood that turns it this beautiful dark colour. And so you end up with a piece of material that has a deep colour that never wears off, looks appropriate for our guitars, has an almost rosewood-ish character, ages gracefully and sounds great."

And of course, Sitka spruce is an 'old faithful', for the top...

"It sounds great, it works great and we love it for good reason. One of the other unique things with these guitars is that we're finishing them with this ultra-thin, water-based, very environmentally friendly finish. But it has the thickness and film characteristic almost like an aged lacquer finish. If you can feel the texture of a piece of wood, it's just barely there. And so it's unique in that it doesn't introduce a very high damping factor to this guitar.

"What you feel is this dynamic, very touch-sensitive character, a bit reminiscent of an old guitar in the way it behaves. It's not maybe quite as durable as, say, our super-high-gloss finishes. This is a little more delicate than that. But I love the character that these guitars develop after a musician has been playing them for a while. To me, as a guitar player, it lights me up. It totally does it for me." G

www.taylorguitars.com

Top Ten

Gibson expands its Maestro pedal range to double digits with five new analogue offerings

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Olly Curtis

MAESTRO PEDALS **FROM £155**

CONTACT **Gibson** WEB **www.maestroelectronics.com**

What You Need To Know

1. **More Maestros?**
Yep, another five to add to the five launched last year when Gibson resurrected the brand with the Fuzz-Tone FZ-M, Discover Delay, Comet Chorus, Ranger Overdrive and Invader Distortion.

2. **What's the deal this time?**
These follow exactly the same three-knob, single-toggle-switch format as previously but add another five effect types: envelope filter, compressor, phaser, tremolo and boost.

3. **Do they do that same two-pedals-in-one trick?**
Yes, that's what the toggle switch is for: giving you access to two different voices. The phaser offers both four- and six-stage phasing, while the tremolo has Harmonic and Classic voicing.

We were happy to see Gibson revive its Maestro brand last year and now that initial release has been expanded upon with another five all-analogue pedals. With the same practical pedalboard-friendly chassis and control layout as the previous five, we now get the Agena Envelope Filter, Arcas Compressor Sustainer, Mariner Tremolo, Orbit Phaser, and Titan Boost.

Agena Envelope Filter

It may not be the most common of effect types, but we're sure there are still plenty of players who want to make use of an envelope filter and its tightly regimented automatic wah capabilities and quacky vocalisation. The Agena delivers its effect in direct response to your playing dynamics, reacting to your softest touches at the maximum clockwise position of the Sense knob. As you roll it back you'll have to pick or strum the strings increasingly harder to trigger the envelope. Between the extremes there's plenty of scope to find a position that offers the best feel for the way you want to play. Two distinct filter frequency options, Hi and Lo, offer basically the same effect, but the filter's frequency range is different for each. Hi mode is brighter and cutting, while Lo has a deeper bark – and it's all set up by Attack and Decay knobs, which determine the shape of the envelope, the vocal character and the duration of the effect that you're going to get. Funky fun.

The chassis offers an ergonomic design with a sloping top panel, and having all the socketry at the back leaves clean sides for placing pedals side by side

That two-in-one capability increases the available options, seen at its best in the phaser and tremolo

Arcas Compressor Sustainer

This one features two modes of compression, each with a different sensitivity to picking attack. These combine with an Attack knob that sets how quickly the compressor engages so you can further tweak the nature of the compression. Besides these, you get a Sustain knob for turning up the amount of the compression, and a Level knob to set the overall output of the pedal. Hi mode is the one that's most sensitive to pick attack and that manifests as a bright, snappy transient at the start of a picked note, while Lo mode offers a more subtle and, perhaps, natural response. With both modes the pedal covers a lot of ground, whether that's aiding picking definition, smoothing levels for consistency or increasing sustain, and there's also a useful boost to be had with the Level knob, which sets up the pedal as a practical always-on tone enhancer.

Mariner Tremolo

In common with several other tremolo pedals on the market, the Mariner offers two distinct tremolo types: Classic, which is a pretty standard amplitude tremolo, and the more texturally complex Harmonic, based on the tremolo found in a number of Fender amps in the early 60s. There's

THE RIVALS

For envelope filtering, there's the Electro-Harmonix Q-Tron Plus (£169) and the Fender Pour Over (£139). The TonePrint technology of TC Electronic's Hypergravity Compressor (£119) offers versatility, while the Keeley Compressor Plus (£149) has two switched options. The Source Audio Vertigo Tremolo (£199) and the Walrus Audio Monument V2 (£179) both have Harmonic and standard tremolo onboard. A couple of pedals that offer both four-and six-stage phasing are Walrus's Lillian (£179) and the German-made Vahlbruch 6-PHI-4 (€229). For a boost with some tonal shaping, there's the Fender Engager (£95) and the Walrus Emissary Parallel Boost (£139) with an interesting take on the genre.

also more variation available thanks to the inclusion of a Shape knob besides the usual Speed and Depth knobs, which both exhibit a usefully wide range. The Shape knob morphs the tremolo waveform from a rounded soft tremolo through all points to a full square wave tremolo and its associated sharper on/off chopped-up sound. Some may miss having tap tempo, but variable waveshape combined with the vintage throb of amplitude tremolo and the Harmonic trem's extra sheen of hazy phasiness delivers a musical versatility.

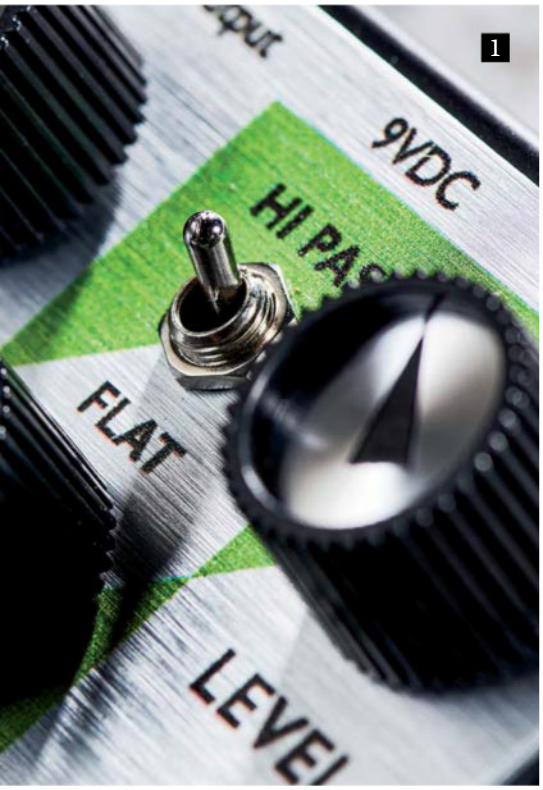
Orbit Phaser

The long-discontinued Maestro PS-1 was the first pedal on the market named as a phase shifter back in the day, and we were hoping for a new incarnation of it. The Orbit isn't quite that, but Maestro tells us that it's a descendent of that pedal and has been re-engineered and tailored to the needs of today's players.

It's switchable between four- and six-stage phasing, so you're effectively getting two quite distinct phasers in a single pedal, both having plenty of adjustability via Width, Rate and Feedback knobs. The overall tone is '1970s warm', and in the four-stage mode you'll find sounds reminiscent of classic four-stagers such as the MXR Phase 90 and Electro-Harmonix's Small Stone. The six-stage mode, which has a more complex voicing to its sweep, is the direct descendent of Maestro's PS-1 range. The most common PS-1A model had no control other than selectable Slow, Medium and Fast speeds, and the Rate knob here amply covers those plus all the variations in between. The Speed knob, in fact, has a very practical range for both phasers, running from a gradually changing sweep that can add colour to rhythmic strumming, through to the warbling of a rotary speaker on fast speed. With the Feedback knob bringing out the vocal 'wow' for a more intense effect, there's plenty here to like.

Titan Boost

A boost pedal to push an amp or a drive pedal is one thing, but if that boost can be targeted in a specific frequency range then it opens up a new layer of possibility. This pedal offers 25dB of boost from its Level knob, plenty to really drive an amp, and has a two-in-one capability that offers a flat frequency response or alternatively channels the sound via a Hi-Pass Filter



1. Each pedal's two-in-one functionality lies with the toggle switch

2. When the pedal is active, the three colours in Maestro's bugle logo light up

3. Access to the battery is simply a matter of loosening the two screws at the business end of the pedal to let the baseplate down – it hinges on the other two screws

to roll off some bottom-end, determined by the position of the HPF knob. The flat position gives you full bottom-end, but switching to Hi-Pass with the HPF knob at minimum delivers an immediate roll-off of the deepest frequencies – and you can gradually roll off more by turning the knob. It's great for targeting exactly how lean you want your boosted sound to be. This can be combined with the Tone knob that operates at the other end of the spectrum to tame the high-end, so you can hit whatever's next in the chain with your desired frequency mix.

Verdict

Maestro has successfully expanded its range with five pedals that complement the previous batch, and the series now covers most of the common effect genres. Okay, there's no reverb here, but they couldn't do that with an analogue pedal in that chassis anyway. With so many competing pedals on the market, the thing that most works in Maestro's favour is that two-in-one capability, which goes some way to justifying the range's asking price by increasing the options available to the user, seen at its best in the phaser and tremolo in this selection.

Each pedal in this Maestro range features a geometric pattern in its own individual colour

MAESTRO AGENA ENVELOPE FILTER

PRICE: £165
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Envelope filter
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Sense, Decay, Attack, Lo/Hi switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V battery or 9V DC adaptor 26.6mA
DIMENSIONS: 87 (w) x 128 (d) x 63 mm (h)

8/10

MAESTRO ARCAS COMPRESSOR SUSTAINER

PRICE: £155
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Compressor
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Sustain, Attack, Level, Lo/Hi switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V battery or 9V DC adaptor 21.9mA1
DIMENSIONS: 87 (w) x 128 (d) x 63mm (h)

8/10

MAESTRO MARINER TREMOLO

PRICE: £165
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Tremolo
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Depth, Shape, Speed, Harmonic/Classic switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V battery or 9V DC adaptor 41.9mA
DIMENSIONS: 87 (w) x 128 (d) x 63mm (h)

8/10

MAESTRO ORBIT PHASER

PRICE: £159
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Phaser
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Width, Rate, Feedback, 6 Stage/4 Stage switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V battery or 9V DC adaptor 27.5mA
DIMENSIONS: 87 (w) x 128 (d) x 63mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

MAESTRO TITAN BOOST

PRICE: £165
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Boost
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Tone, HPF, Level, Hi Pass/Flat switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V battery or 9V DC adaptor 38.6mA
DIMENSIONS: 87 (w) x 128 (d) x 63mm (h)

8/10

PROS Solid build; straightforward control array; two-in-one capability **CONS** Rivets on the base cause the pedals to wobble if you don't fit the included rubber feet

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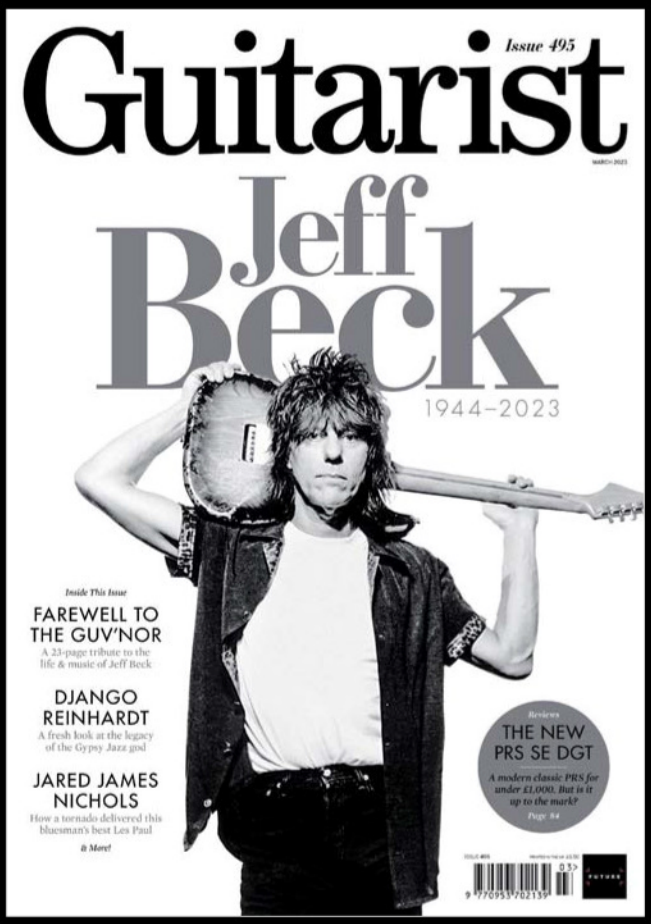

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BOUGHT & SOLD

MARTIN TAYLOR

The jazz maestro recounts the tale of a disappointment with a Gibson ES-175 and his surprise over a freebie vintage Martin

PHOTO BY DEREK CLARK / COURTESY FIBONACCI GUITARS

What was the first serious guitar you bought with your own money?

"Well, from the age of 11 I started playing in my dad's band, and we were playing at weddings and village hall dances and things. I got paid the same as the rest of the guys, which was anywhere between £3.50 to £4 – £4 was a good gig, we never hit the £5 mark. At the time I had a really terrible guitar with a real cheese-cutter action, but I just saved up and eventually I had 100 quid and so I went with a friend to the West End of London to a music shop at Centerpoint. The guy in the shop says to me, 'Hey, what are you boys doing?' And my friend said, 'He wants to buy a guitar.' The guy said to me, 'How much do you want to spend on it?' I said, '£100.' That was too much for him, for some reason he was so pissed off at me that he threw me out onto the street. So I went to Ivor Mairants' shop and Ivor showed me a Guild Starfire Deluxe, and he said, 'I'll give you a case, a strap, a set of strings…' and there was a capo in there, too. So that would have been in 1968."

What was the last guitar you bought and why?

"I bought a guitar from Rainbow Music in Dundee a few months ago because I was doing my annual Scottish guitar retreat and one of my students was coming from Canada and he didn't want to bring a guitar with him. So I went in and I bought a Cort acoustic guitar. I tried it and it's really nice. It sounds good and it's very playable. So that's a guitar that I actually keep here in case anyone needs a guitar at the retreats in the future."

> "Some guitars don't inspire me to play. The sign of a good guitar is one you really want to play and don't want to put down"

What was the most incredible find or bargain you've ever had when buying guitars?

"Well, I was given a 1929 Martin 000-45 when I recorded the 'Blue Guitars' from the Scott Chinery guitar collection [featured on the album *Masterpiece Guitars* by Martin Taylor and Steve Howe]. When Steve and I had finished the recording, Steve said, 'Could you swing by Scott's house before you go to the airport because he wants to give you something.' So I went by and we sat down and there was an old battered guitar case. Scott said to me, 'I like hearing you play the flat-top guitars, so I'd like to give you this as a little present.' I opened the case and it was this Martin. I don't know anything about flat-top guitars, so I said, 'Oh, that's really nice, thank you very much.' I didn't realise what I had. Later on Steve rang me and asked what Scott had given me and I said, 'I'm not sure, let me have a look. Oh, it's a 1929

PHOTO BY JO HANLEY

MARTIN'S GO-TO GEAR

"There are two guitars that I use now, the Fibonacci Martin Taylor Joya and the Lola, which is a smaller 13-inch body and which has got a bit more of an electric sound – a bit more punch to it. So when I play solo I play the Joya, and when I play in a duo with Ulf Wakenius or Frank Vignola, for instance, I'll usually use the Lola because it matches their guitars better.

"Then I use an LR Baggs Session, from the Align Series, and go into an LR Baggs EQ, an LR Baggs reverb, an LR Baggs DI and then straight into the house. I travel very light. I haven't used a guitar amp for a long time. I like to fill the room. I'm more rock 'n' roll than you think..."

Martin 000-45.' And Steve went silent on the other end of the phone. Then he said, 'I'd hang on to that if I were you...'"

What's the strongest case of buyer's remorse you've ever had after buying a guitar?

"When I went to America for the first time in 1973, I went to the guitar stores on 48th Street [in New York City] because I wanted to get a Gibson ES-175. And so I'm in the shop and I saw this one hanging up on the wall, but it wasn't the antique sunburst finish, it was kind of a red sunburst. I didn't play it very much and I asked how much it was and the guy said, '$375', so I gave him $375 and went off with it. Then, as I started playing it every night on gigs, I didn't really like the guitar very much. Why did I buy it? And why did I buy a red one? I have no idea."

Have you ever sold a guitar that you now intensely regret letting go?

"I had a D'Angelico Excel that I sold and, while I didn't particularly regret it, sometimes I think it would be nice to still have. I got myself a Gibson Johnny Smith, which was made in 1970 that I really liked. But, again, for some reason it was a red sunburst, which I didn't particularly like, but I liked the guitar. I sold that in the mid-80s, not because I wanted to but because I was broke. I sold it to a friend of mine and said, 'Look, if you ever decide to sell it again, would you sell it back to me?' He said he would, but he didn't!"

What's your best guitar-buying tip?

"My tip wouldn't be so much of a physical thing about the guitar, I just have this thing that if I pick up a guitar and I find myself playing it and playing it, then it's a good guitar for me. There are some guitars I pick up – and they can be expensive – that I play a few notes on and just put down. They don't inspire me to play. The sign of a good guitar is one you really want to play and don't want to put down."

Do you ever stop to stare in a guitar shop window or browse online looking at gear?

"No, not really. I don't go looking for it, but there are so many really good archtop luthiers now and sometimes on social media I'll see a beautiful handcrafted archtop guitar. I saw one recently by Theo Scharpach, a beautiful work of art. And that's the kind of thing that I'm aspiring to with my [signature] guitar builders at Fibonacci, on the Joya, Lola and Ruby guitars.

"But when I'm scrolling through social media sometimes a guitar will come up and I'll go, 'Oh wow, look at that!' I might see an interesting cutaway or a nice tailpiece or something I think looks beautiful. I just like to see the artistry and the excellence of someone like Theo Scharpach or John Monteleone. I've got books here of vintage guitars that I sometimes browse through on a wet winter's afternoon, which we do have here in Scotland occasionally [laughs]."

If forced to make a choice, would you rather buy a good guitar and a cheap amp, or a cheap guitar and a really good amp?

"I don't know because I don't actually use an amp; I use the LR Baggs pedals. Funnily enough, recently I played in Naples and my guitar didn't arrive. So I borrowed a guitar, which was a nice instrument, and because I had my LR Baggs [Align Series] Session pedal, which really warms up the sound, and I had my EQ and reverb, I found that if I plug any guitar into that, I can get it to sound pretty good. So I don't know – I'm not really much of an expert on guitar amps." **[DM]**

For Martin's current touring, online learning and clinic schedules, visit the website

www.martintaylor.com

Martin Taylor's eye is always drawn to the beauty and craftsmanship of archtop guitars, such as his Fibonacci signatures. He favours his Joya signature (left and above) for solo work, and picks up the Lola for ensembles

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The MOD SQUAD

WHAT'S ON YOUR TELE?

Is that a whammy bar I see before me on Fender's finest? Close to sacrilegious (unless it's a Bigsby), a vibrato just doesn't belong on a Telecaster. Until now, suggests Dave Burrluck

Part of the appeal of the Telecaster is its simplicity, particularly since it doesn't have a vibrato, unlike the other Fender classics, the Stratocaster, Jazzmaster and Jaguar. Admittedly, that's not the whole truth – but out of some 61 production Telecasters listed on Fender's current website, only *two* have vibratos: the Vintera '60s Telecaster Bigsby and the American Ultra Luxe Telecaster Floyd Rose HH – a classic vibrato and a modern dive-bombing whammy.

There are some Tele-aimed vibratos available, such as the Super-Vee Maverick, but that is essentially a Strat-style vibrato and requires considerable routing of the body. The Stetsbar, meanwhile, is described as "a professional tremolo that stays in tune and does not require any additional holes or route" and is another option that certainly changes the look. You can now add VegaTrem to that shortlist. You might have come across its VT1 UltraTrem for Strat-style guitars, which is a much more densely populated market for 'improved' vibratos. But now the Mallorca-based company, founded by Isaac Vega, has launched the "tremolutionary" VegaTrem VT2: "We did it again," the website announces, "a tremolo for T-Style guitars that does what seemed impossible... taking advantage of the existing spaces on Leo Fender's iconic model to install a vibrato that achieves an action range superior to any other."

Now, I know this is The Mod Squad, but we're not fans of irreversible mods, so the neat and (as far as we're aware) unique feature of this new design is that it doesn't require any such modification of your prized plank. The classic Tele bridge plate look is sort of retained, but it pivots midway. There's no inertia block like the Strat's vibrato and the lower portion of the top plate is attached to six springs that (you guessed it!) go in the six string holes that pass through the body [pic 1]. You then top-load the strings at the back of the bridge and, hey presto! Can it really be that simple? And more to the point, will it actually work? VegaTrem graciously shipped us one to try.

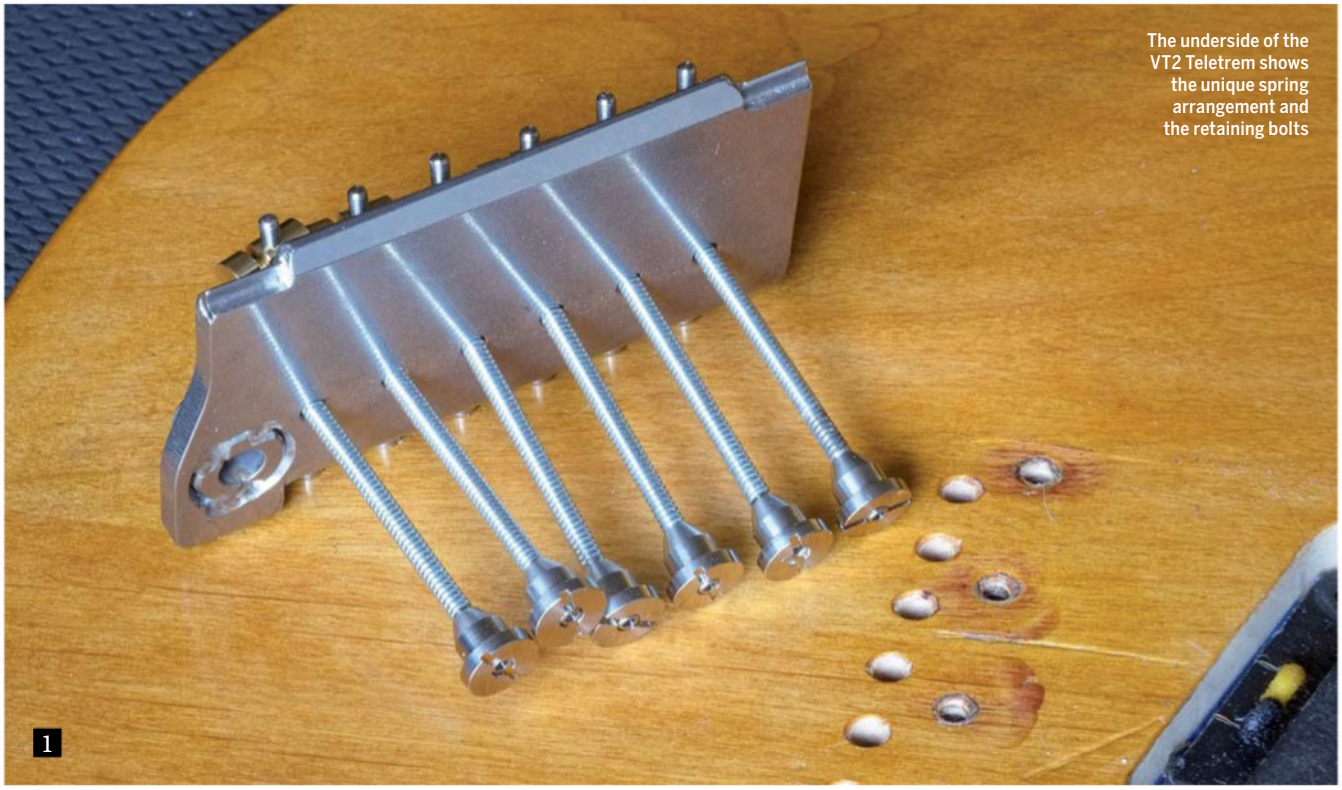
> "VegaTrem's VT2 doesn't require any irreversible modding of your prized plank"

What's In The Box?

Not that much, if we're honest. You get the three components: the top half of the bridge plate, which also holds the bridge pickup; the bottom half with those almost laughable-looking small-diameter springs attached; and a pretty serious-looking arm with Floyd Rose-style screw-on collar (plus the two screws to mount it and a couple of Allen keys to dial in the saddle height and the intonation).

VegaTrem talks us through the hardware: "We took into serious account the materials we used for the system: a fulcrum and a 4mm [thick] plate made of marine stainless steel (316), and brass saddles. We manufacture in Europe with the same materials, quality, process and precision control used in the manufacturing of surgical materials." The overall weight of the vibrato including that substantial arm is 0.336kg (0.74lb), quite a bit more than our outgoing standard stamped-steel bridge plate and saddles, which weigh 0.096kg (0.21lb).

There are actually two VT2 models, the Classic and the Modern. The former is for T-style guitars that use the 'classic' dimensions of 71mm between the string holes to the top screw of the bridge pickup,



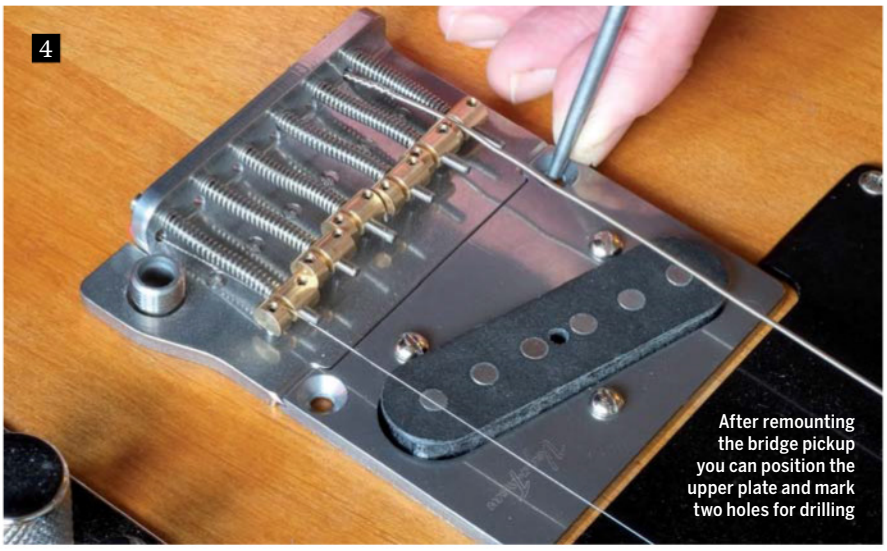
1 The underside of the VT2 Teletrem shows the unique spring arrangement and the retaining bolts

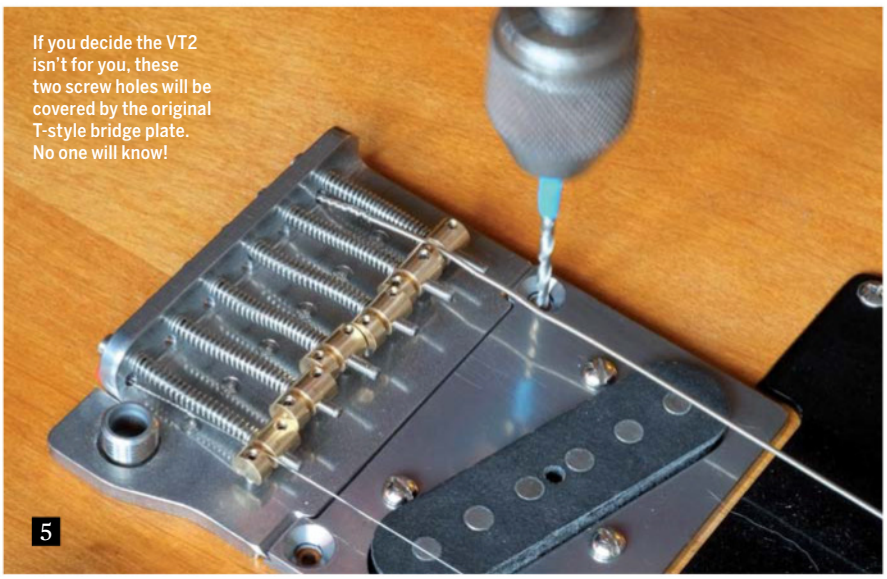
PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK

Dave's Wilkinson kit-build loaded with the VegaTrem VT2 vibrato system

Once the original bridge plate is removed you can mount the VT2 through the string holes

Tighten those retaining bolts with a large blade screwdriver and stage one is complete


After remounting the bridge pickup you can position the upper plate and mark two holes for drilling


If you decide the VT2 isn't for you, these two screw holes will be covered by the original T-style bridge plate. No one will know!

and the latter is for T-style guitars that use 'modern' dimensions where that same distance is 66mm.

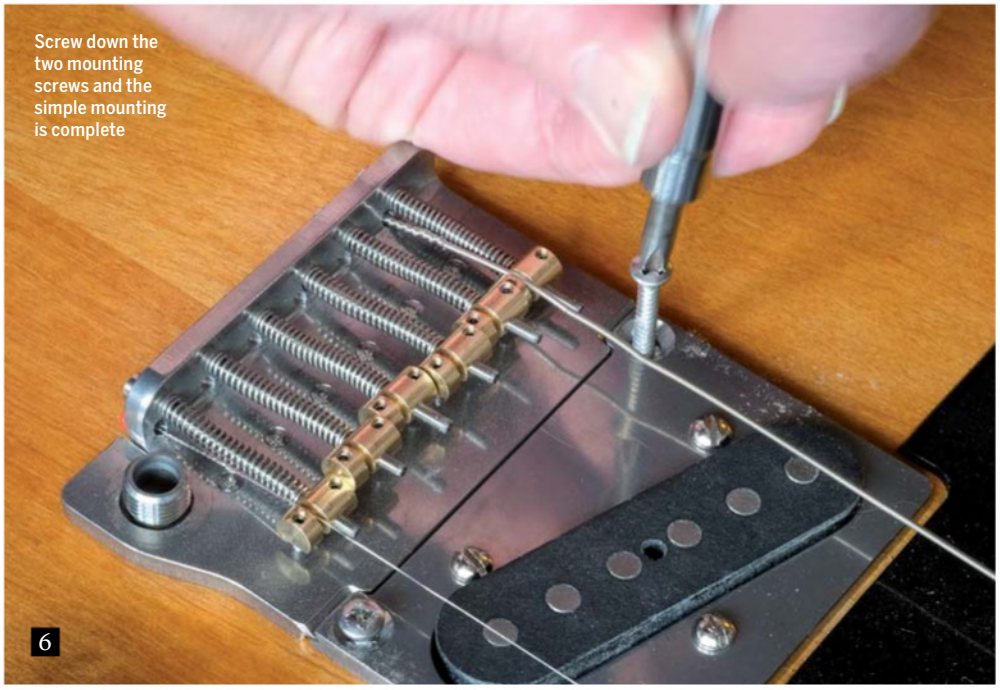
As you can see, the saddles are brass, but there are six (not three) with a diameter of approximately 6.5mm with flattened bases. Each has quite a deep circular string groove that measures 0.046 inches wide – I've switched to imperial measurement because you'll note this suggests 0.010 to 0.046-gauge strings are the largest you can use without having to open the slot on the low E saddle. As to the saddle screw heights, we have two saddles with 5.94mm high screws and four with taller 7.75mm.

The donor guitar is the Wilkinson kit-build that I put together back in 2021, a now rather well-used and well-played T-style with pretty vintage specification including a 184mm (7.25-inch) fingerboard radius. The first thing I did was put those VT2 saddles with the lower height screws in the outer string positions and approximated the saddle positions by measuring those on the host guitar.

Quick Fit

As I said, the VT2 is designed to be a reversible modification so fitting the unit is pretty easy. I remove the strings then the bridge plate, and unscrew the bridge pickup, which I then tape over to keep it in place in the cavity. Possibly the trickiest part is removing the string ferrules on the back of the guitar. Obviously, there have been various types of these since the early 50s, but luckily ours came out easily – I just used a small screwdriver inserted into the string holes and lightly tapped the ferrules out using a small hammer. The lower moving

PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK


Screw down the two mounting screws and the simple mounting is complete

6

MOD SPEC

PRODUCT: VegaTrem VT2 Classic vibrato
PRICE: From £229 from UK stockists such as Andertons
SKILL LEVEL: Easy and reversible to fit
https://vegatrem.com

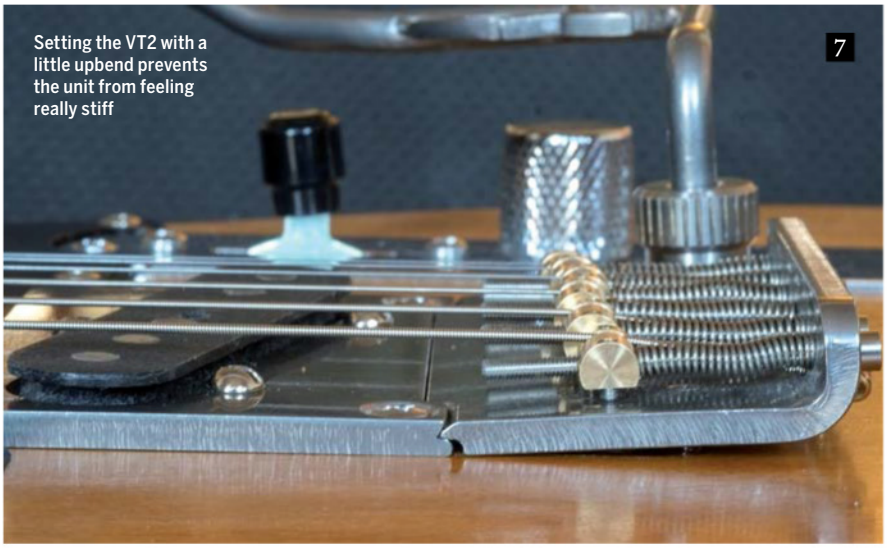
PROS & CONS

PROS Unique concept, nicely engineered; brings a bigger sound to your T-style. But...

CONS Very stiff action and hard to balance string and spring tension; it adds quite a bit of weight to your guitar, too

7/10

"The functionality and sound make it a cool-looking and sounding addition"


Setting the VT2 with a little upbend prevents the unit from feeling really stiff

7

portion of the vibrato then just pushes into the string holes [pic 2] and you wind on the new 'ferrules', which are nicely machined slot-head bolts with an outer diameter of 9.45mm. These will hold things in place and presumably allow some tensioning of the six springs [pic 3].

You now need to remount the bridge pickup to the second plate. I use a couple of lightly tensioned old strings to make sure everything is lined up, mark the holes and drill with a 2.5mm bit. A little dry lube on the two screws and we're done [pics 4, 5 & 6].

Setup Time

The strings now top-load from the back of the bridge, which means there's a lot less tension over the saddles compared with the string-through-body style. As I've already prepared the saddles – I screwed in the height adjustment screws flush with the saddle tops and set approximate position – I luckily find that when I put on the new set of strings, things are not too far out of whack. That low string angle behind the saddles means it's easy to set intonation without slackening the strings.

Normally, I 'deck' a vibrato – that's what I like – but here the vibrato sits up a little. I try tightening the springs' tension, but things feel very stiff so I settle on an approx. 2.5mm gap under the back of the vibrato, which should give a little up-bend [pic 7]. As ever, use a spacer of the right thickness under the back of the vibrato, tune to pitch and make sure the spring tension is holding that shim in place. It is. Holding the guitar upright, just slightly loosen the spring tension – we have six springs here – until that shim drops out. It's all pretty easy.

But Does It Work?

It does – but there are quite a few caveats. First off, if you want a vibrato with an ultra-light Jeff Beck-like 'fluttery' feel, this is not for you. As set, even if you want just a little shimmer, then it feels pretty tight, but it does give that beautiful slight vibrato, just like touching a Bigsby or pushing/pulling the neck, which sounds great with some Fender clean amp tone and rich reverb. With strings stretched it's very in-tune, too, even if you manage a down-bend.

As you can see in the full-page image at the start of this feature, the arm has a VT logo welded to it – you can order an arm without that, which I think I'd prefer.

But there's little doubt that the thick and relative weightiness of the 4mm stainless steel is playing its part – not dissimilar to the inertia block of a Strat's vibrato – and it appears to give this Tele a more forward, 'bigger' sound with a long, smooth sustain, which is perhaps its trump card.

Its very boutique style is pretty cool, too – it almost comes across as a prototype that Paul Bigsby and Leo Fender might have hand-fashioned in a metal shop back in the day. Most vibratos I've experienced are all about function. But it's the combination of the VT2's functionality *and* sound that might make it a rather cool-looking and sounding addition to yer ol' plank. G

FINISHING TOUCH

A reader and luthier offers some finishing advice following our recent StewMac offset kit build

You can widen the variety of your oil finishes by adding oil-based colourants

PHOTO BY DAVE BURRLUCK

Q Hi Dave, as a long standing reader of *Guitarist* magazine and now a builder of high-end bespoke electric guitars (which I hope you would at some point care to review), my email concerns your excellent and captivating article in issue 493 under the heading, The Finish Line [The Mod Squad]. I have to admit you did a rather neat job in this regard and I do like the swimming pool top rout and those small pickguard islands for the controls and jack socket. It all came together really well.

The main point of my email deals with the Osmo Polyx-Oil that you decided to use – and no better a product if I may say so, as I use this German product myself where I feel it is best suited.

This product would suggest it is polymer-based therefore pretty robust given that its main use commercially is for wooden floors and furniture, and we could say that guitars align with the latter in many respects – items to touch and admire. It comes in four grades: glossy, satin and two versions of matte. The glossy variant is not something I favour, rather the satin and even the matt versions.

The real secret in applying it is to thin it with white spirit as this greatly helps the product flow out when using a square of lint-free cloth (available from Axminster Power Tools) with a cotton wool bud inside of the square. Thinning the oil also helps accelerate cure time and I tend to leave a good 24 hours before applying more coats, each being 24 hours apart. After, say, four to five coats, this is usually enough, although you can add more if you feel inclined to do so. Once a satin finish is fully cured, one recommendation is to hand-rub the finish with 3M's scouring pads as this imparts a wonderful finish that's silky smooth to the touch.

One of the advantages of oil finishes such as this in particular is that you can colour it with any oil-based colourant, better still artists' oils such as those made by Rowney, Winsor & Newton, and so on. A small amount is recommended to get a handle on the colour value and then run some tests on scrap wood to get a final reading, as this will let you know when enough is enough.

Normally, you would apply colour to Osmo as a starter application after which you apply more oil without the colour. I would suggest using the colours sparingly so that they remain transparent, which then reveals what a typical water-based dye stain would do when applied directly to wood, or have the stain held in suspension in a compatible clear coat.

As a builder-cum-finisher, oil-based applications offer great potential over other types of clear coats, even on a commercial footing. Osmo oils can be sprayed on, but top-level results can be done by hand. I noted you used a hair [paint] brush to apply on the flatter areas, but even better than that is to use foam brushes, which are cheap and disposable, or explore the technique of applying Osmo simply with a cotton rag when the finish is thinned.

Duke Taylor Guitar Works (Aberdeen)

A Great advice there, Duke, not least for those of us working at home! Osmo Polyx-Oil is certainly something I'll use again and next time I'll try your colouring techniques.

Duke also asked about getting a review in our pages. If you're a maker – new or experienced – that would like to be featured, please do feel free to email me at guitarist@futurenet.com

That should give you something to think about till our next issue. In the meantime, if you have any modding questions, or suggestions, drop us a line – The Mod Squad.

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Huw Price's **Nitty Gritty**

Explore the main types of recording microphone alongside their pros and cons

Recording Microphones

All microphones are transducers and their sole purpose is to turn acoustic energy into electrical energy in the form of an alternating current. As guitarists, we use microphones to capture the sounds of our acoustic and electric instruments for recording onto hard drives – or tape, if you're so inclined. In this issue's feature we'll be discussing how the various types of microphone work, as well as their pros and cons for guitar recording applications.

Ribbon Microphones

The term 'dynamic microphone' has become synonymous with moving coil types, but ribbons are dynamic mics, too. While both rely on electrodynamics, the way moving coil and ribbon microphones operate is quite different. Invented during the 1920s by an RCA engineer called Harry F Olson, the ribbon was the first high-fidelity microphone and it revolutionised music and movie soundtrack recording.

A very thin length of corrugated aluminium foil is suspended in the space between two magnetically charged polepieces. The ribbon moves freely in response to changes in atmospheric pressure, namely sound waves. This induces an electric current within the ribbon, with each end connected to a transformer to set the impedance and balance the audio output.

In practice, sound waves actually flow around the magnetic polepieces, which results in a phase difference between pressure at the front (P1) and rear (P2) of the ribbon. The pressure that actually drives the ribbon is P1 minus P2.

Sound waves arriving from the side of the microphone exert equal pressure on the front and rear of the ribbon so that it doesn't move and so there's no signal output. This is why most ribbon microphones have a figure-eight pickup pattern. Ribbon mics are sometimes referred to as velocity microphones because the size of the output voltage is determined by the velocity of the ribbon's movement.

These kinds of mic can capture very natural and detailed recordings, but during the 1960s they became less popular due to the need for microphone preamps combining high gain with low noise and the ribbon's susceptibility to damage. Even so, they have enjoyed a significant revival in recent years, with onboard electronics and rare-earth magnets making them lighter and easier to use.

Moving Coil Microphones

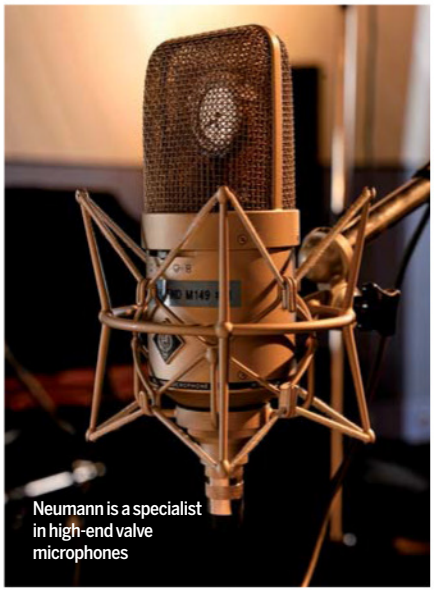
A moving coil microphone operates like a speaker in reverse. An alternating current sets a speaker cone into motion to produce sound waves. In contrast, sound waves cause the microphone's diaphragm to move, which in turn produces an electric current.

RCA's original 1920s ribbon mic paved the way for modern versions such as this

The ribbon was the first high-fidelity mic and it revolutionised music and movie soundtrack recording

A coil of wire is wrapped around a cylindrical former for rigidity. This is attached to a diaphragm and the coil 'floats' within a magnetic field. When the coil assembly moves, an alternating current is generated within the coil and is fed to an output transformer. The pickup pattern is usually cardioid, which mostly detects sound waves coming from the front and sides, while rejecting sound that's arriving from the rear.

Moving coil mics generate higher output levels than traditional ribbon designs, are more robust physically and can also withstand higher sound pressure levels. In ribbon mics, the ribbon functions as both the diaphragm and the conductor. With moving coil models, the diaphragm and conductive coil are separate components and the assembly is heavier and clunkier. Consequently, moving coil mics are less sensitive and achieve lower fidelity. Frequency response tends to be quite uneven, with rolled-off high frequencies and sometimes hyped upper-mids. From a purely technical perspective, these characteristics may be regarded as shortcomings. However, the limitations of moving coil designs can be advantageous for some applications, as we'll discover later.



Neumann is a specialist in high-end valve microphones

The famed Shure SM57 is an example of a moving coil mic

Condenser Microphones

Condenser is another word for capacitor, and the sound sensing capsule used in this type of microphone is actually a capacitor with oppositely charged conductive surfaces separated by an air gap. This is known as an air-dielectric capacitor.

The rear surface is a solid metal backplate, and the front surface is a movable diaphragm. This is sometimes made from metal, but plastics such as PVC or Mylar coated with gold are more commonly used. Sound pressure changes cause the diaphragm to move, which varies the gap between the diaphragm and static backplate. This causes the current across the capsule to alternate in a way that is analogous to the original sound wave.

The current is tiny, so condenser microphones require onboard preamps to increase signal level and lower output impedance. Condenser microphones therefore have to be provided with power in order to function. Transformers have traditionally handled output duties, but transformer-less electronically balanced outputs have become commonplace.

Capsules differ in size, with small capsule condensers generally being favoured for critical recordings where fidelity and neutrality are required. They're also ideal for instruments that have a lot of high-frequency content. Large capsule condensers tend to provide more scale in the midrange and are often engineered to enhance and flatter the sound source.

Many large capsule condensers are fixed cardioid, while small capsules designs can be fixed cardioid or omnidirectional, which means that they pick up sound waves coming from all directions. Many condensers have switchable pickup patterns or interchangeable capsules with different patterns.

Valve Microphones

Condenser microphones pre-dated transistors by a couple of decades, so microphone manufacturers were obliged to design valve preamps. Some of the most revered and sought-after condenser microphones were made in the 1940s and 50s, and they're still regularly used in high-end studios.

Prices for a Neumann U47, U48 or M49 will most likely run to five figures – and it's the same for an AKG C12 or Telefunken M251. These are the microphones that were used during the later rock 'n' roll era, all through the 60s and into the 70s. They literally set the tone for guitar music – when you look at classic studio shots of The Beatles, The Stones, Led Zeppelin and so forth, you can see them in action.

Solid-state condenser microphones usually get 48-volt phantom power from mixing desks or microphone preamps.

Like guitars, classic microphones can be upgraded with better capsules, valves and transformers

Valve microphones, however, all need individual power supplies so the setup is slightly more complicated.

Much like vintage guitars, the enduring interest in classic microphones has prompted microphone companies to manufacture reissues that are considerably cheaper than their inspirations. There are also modern valve-microphone designs that are mostly manufactured in Asia and offer great value for money. Also like guitars, they can be upgraded with better capsules, valves and transformers.

Although the vast majority of ribbon microphones were passive devices, RCA manufactured active ribbons with valve preamps back in the 1930s. These days, active ribbon microphones with solid-state preamps are easy to find, and companies such as Royer even offer active ribbon mics with valve preamps. Active ribbons are far easier to interface with microphone preamps and can be used on quieter instruments. G

MIC UP

Huw helps you find the best microphone for recording electric and acoustic guitar

Acoustic Guitar

RIBBON: Fingerpicked acoustics are fairly quiet instruments so you'll require a microphone preamp with a lot of gain and exceedingly low noise to make passive ribbon microphones a viable choice. Active ribbon microphones, on the other hand, will be just fine and you'll achieve a very natural and unhyped sound. Bear in mind that most ribbon microphones roll off in the upper frequencies, so you may need to add some treble and upper midrange using an equalizer to bring out the chime and sparkle.

MOVING COIL: Recording engineers rarely use moving coils on acoustics because they lack detail and the high frequencies roll off. Although they generate more output than passive ribbons, you'll still need a high-gain/low-noise preamp. Even so, an acoustic can sound pretty decent with a moving coil, especially when you need a strong midrange and don't mind finessing things with an equalizer. Even if a moving coil can't capture the true tone of an acoustic guitar, it will still outperform the vast majority of onboard pickup systems.

CONDENSER: Large or small capsule condensers are the industry standards for recording acoustics. They are highly sensitive, capture subtle details and generate high-output levels. A small capsule may be preferred when a natural tone with lots of high-frequency content is needed. Large capsule condensers often produce a fuller sound with a greater sense of scale, fatter low-mids and softer treble. If the microphone has bass roll-off switching, use it to eliminate rumble and boom.

Electric Guitar

RIBBON: Strong blasts of air can break the ribbon, but that didn't deter Eddie Kramer from using Beyerdynamic M160s when recording Hendrix. Most cardioid and figure-eight microphones exhibit proximity effect when placed too close to a sound source. This can result in a boomy tone – and ribbon microphones are quite prone to it.

The fix is to place the microphone 100mm (around four inches) or more away from the speaker. This helps protect the microphone and a vocal pop filter can provide an additional safeguard. In this application, passive ribbons generate ample signal level and the treble roll-off helps to minimise harshness. In short, ribbons are ideal for recording electric guitar and you can buy very decent examples for less than £100.

MOVING COIL: Microphones such as the Shure SM57 and Sennheiser 421 have been the go-to choice for decades. Moving coils are extremely robust, so they can go right up against speaker cloth without distorting or risk of damage. This minimises room ambience and spillage, and gives you that in-yer-face guitar tone. Although 'inferior' to ribbons and condensers – from a technical standpoint – a moving coil's inherent bass and treble roll-off can keep the lows tight and the highs sweet, and any upper-midrange lift will cut and define.

CONDENSER: Small capsule condensers are rarely used, but large capsules are extremely common. For clean and semi-dirty tones, a condenser microphone can capture a realistic and natural tone with all the detailed nuances. Higher volume levels can overload the mic's onboard electronics, but this can usually be overcome if it has a built-in attenuation pad. Some engineers prefer to angle the microphone so the speaker fires across the capsule.

For heavier tones and high gain, condenser and moving coil microphones are often combined for the best of both worlds. When close mic'ing, it's best to align the capsule and diaphragm to minimise phase shift. Alternatively, use the moving coil up close with the condenser set back to capture room ambience.

CLASSIC ROCK

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Point Of View

Have you ever considered how you assess your speaker cab's sound? Zilla Cabs' Paul Gough suggests you shift your perspective

Seeing things from a different perspective can be hard. Luckily, hearing things from a different perspective is easy; we just sometimes need a little nudge to know it can be done. This issue we're going to take a look at how – without changing our equipment – we can hear things in a slightly different way.

A few years ago I started to hear an argument surface stating that vertical speaker cabinets are mathematically better than their horizontal siblings. I've always been quite good at and interested in maths, and obviously interested in speaker cabinets, but other than possible reflections from the floor, it was hard for me to see how maths would have any real bearing on what was effectively a very similar cab just rotated by 90 degrees. Surely any possible effect would just be rotated into a different plane? (Rather than side to side, it would be top to bottom or front to back.) The argument centred on the fact that different parts of a loudspeaker (driver) sound surprisingly different and will often be moving in different ways at any one time – which is quite true.

If you think of two waves coming from opposite sides of a speaker, each with a peak (a high point in the wave) and a trough (a low point) reaching your ear, they will have travelled different distances and it is likely that one wave is at or near a peak and the other may well be near a low point, slightly cancelling each other out and creating what we call a difference in phase. In reality, a difference in phase is rarely desirable and at its worst would make what could be a lovely tone sound like it is played through a 1920s radio. This effect would be made worse in a horizontal 2x12 if you imagine one side of the left speaker compared with the opposite side of the right speaker. This isn't ideal, but in reality is a lot less dramatic, something a lot of us are subconsciously used to and one of the many problems that just doesn't really need solving.

Where this effect is most obvious is when moving side to side, presumably on stage, but those guitarists who move side to side on stage will often move up and down. And let's be honest, most of us are stuck on a stage we can't move around, with a crash cymbal 2ft away from our ear. In this situation a vertical cab will take up less room, have a speaker closer to your ear and, as mentioned in previous articles, often be a more practical solution. We didn't need phase differences and mathematics to work that one out.

I don't want to come across as flippant – it *is* really interesting to consider the impacts of horizontal versus vertical speaker cabs. What's most important here is that this is a good starting point from which to think about how we perceive our gear and, more specifically, how we hear our speaker cabinets.

Imagine the common situation when recording of placing the speaker cabinet in the live room and our amp in the control room, effectively listening to the speaker cabinet through studio monitors. When we kill the sound in the control room, we can often hear the cabinet in the other room – sounding quiet and sometimes muffled. The cabinet hasn't magically started sounding bad, it's just the wall, door and glass in the way that's affected how we're hearing it. This is an extreme case, but it's useful in allowing us to lessen this effect and consider more common situations and how their effects can be more subtle but still audible.

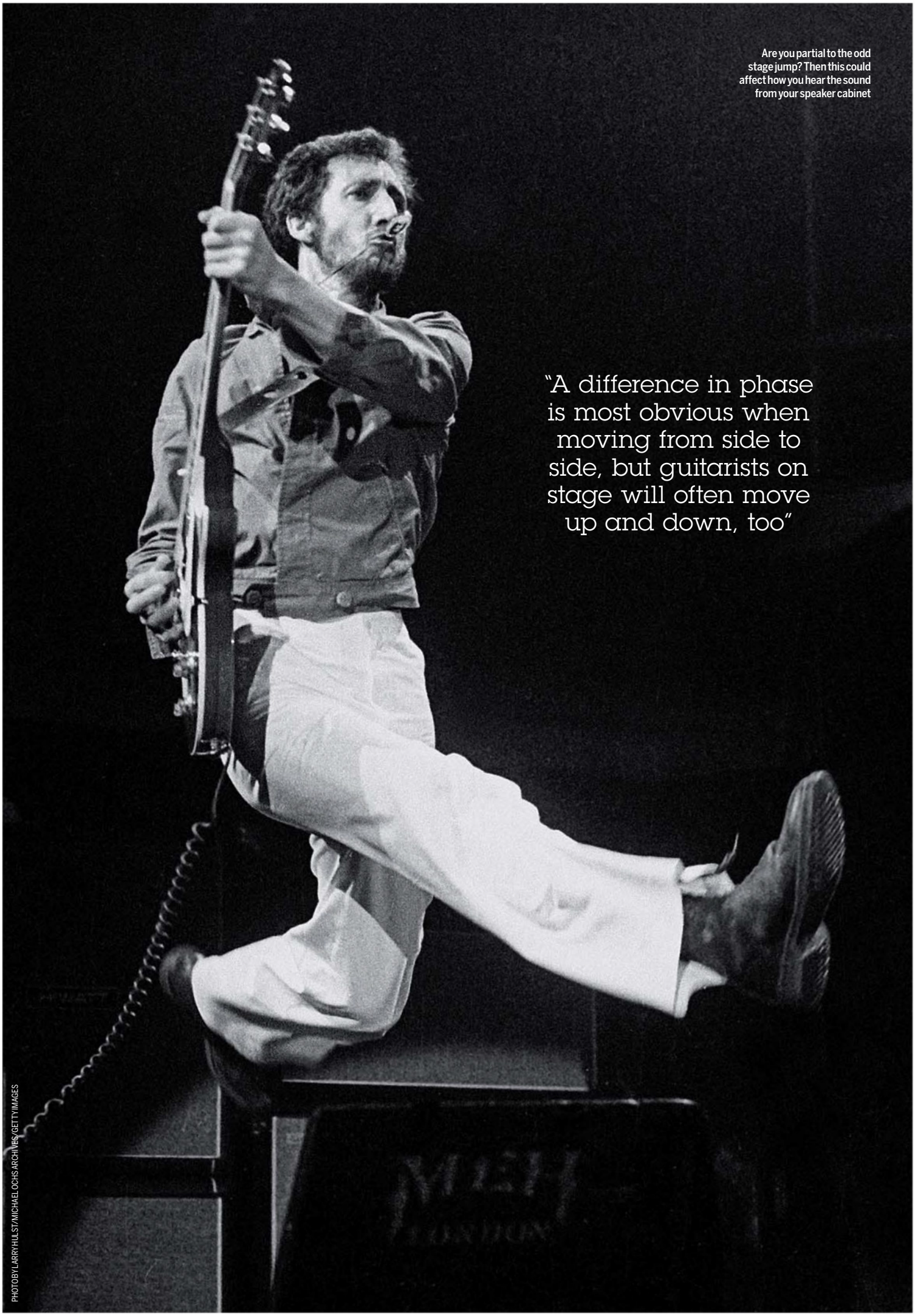
As a cab builder I often have to test speaker cabinets from behind so as not to damage my ears, and I've gotten strangely quite familiar with how individual speakers sound from this position. Most people won't ever have to do this, but the position in front of the cabinet is a big deal. Whether you're standing, sitting, facing or with your back to the cab/combo, the sound won't change but how you *perceive* it will. Now, consider that, when on stage, you often tweak your amp by standing directly over the speakers. Even I can't listen to speakers using my shins! Don't be surprised if the sound you thought you had while at your amp is different when you get to the front of the stage.

> "Don't be surprised if the sound you had at your amp is different when you get to the stage"

So the next time you're assessing the sounds coming from your speakers, stop and think about how your position – and that of the amp and cab themselves – will affect what you're hearing. It's only obvious when you experience it! G

Vertical cabs take up less space so are ideal for smaller stages

PHOTO COURTESY OF ZILLA CABS



Are you partial to the odd stage jump? Then this could affect how you hear the sound from your speaker cabinet

"A difference in phase is most obvious when moving from side to side, but guitarists on stage will often move up and down, too"

PHOTO BY LARRY HULST/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Rod Brakes' Classic Gear

Gibson's "greatest value ever" electric solidbodies appeared in an array of designs

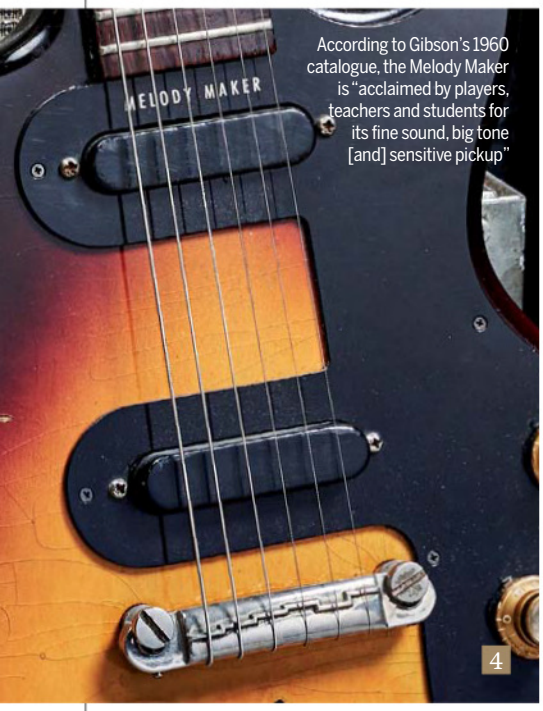
Gibson Melody Makers

At first glance, the 1959 debut Melody Maker closely resembles the original single-cut, sunburst-finish Les Paul Junior introduced earlier in 1954. Similarly constructed using a mahogany slab-body and neck with an unbound 22-fret Brazilian rosewood 'board featuring dot markers, it's clear where this single-pickup guitar takes its design cues from. But with a depth of just 1 3/8-inch, the body of the Melody Maker is significantly thinner than the 1 3/4-inch deep Junior. Its headstock, too, is more slender than the Junior's. With a straighter appearance it forgoes Gibson's iconic profile.

However, it's the PU-380 pickup that really sets the Melody Maker apart in terms of sound. (For a great demo, check out Chris Buck's *Friday Fretworks* YouTube episode 'A 60s Gibson for less than a new one?!') Inherited from Gibson's Skylark lap steel, this single-coil unit was simply built by winding 42-gauge wire around an Alnico bar magnet for roughly 8,500 turns to give a DC resistance reading around 7kohms. It's a similar concept to the archetypal Fender pickup, the obvious difference being the PU-380 does not feature separate polepieces. It was initially constructed with a grey fibre bobbin, before a moulded nylon type was introduced in 1960. For this reason, older Melody Makers have slightly wider pickup covers. PU-380s can also be spotted on Gibson's ES-120T electric archtop, as well as the Epiphone-brand equivalents of the Melody Makers, the Olympics.

Similar to a Strat (or indeed Gibson's 'McCarty unit' of the late 1940s), the Melody Makers' pickups and electronics are attached to the instrument's pickguard. In the case of the debut Melody Maker and its shorter 22 3/4-inch-scale Melody Maker 3/4 sibling, this amounts to a single PU-380 positioned near the bridge, plus volume and tone controls. Meanwhile, the Melody Maker D/Double (listed in late '59 and first shipped the following year) sports an additional PU-380 at the neck, independent volume and tone controls for each pickup, and a three-way selector switch.

In 1961, the Melody Makers changed from a single- to double-cutaway design, and in 1965 the body shape altered yet again to incorporate pointier horns spaced slightly further apart, while the neck join moved from the 16th to the 18th fret. At this point, the standard finish switched from sunburst to cherry red. Full access to the upper frets was high on Gibson's agenda, and in 1966 the Melody Maker line followed in the footsteps of the Les Paul range by converting to the iconic SG style, whereupon a choice of two regular finishes were introduced: Pelham Blue and Fire Engine Red. At the same time, the pickguard and pickup covers changed from black to white and a vibrato unit became standard.



According to Gibson's 1960 catalogue, the Melody Maker is "acclaimed by players, teachers and students for its fine sound, big tone [and] sensitive pickup"

4

> It's the PU-380 pickup that really sets the Melody Maker apart from the Les Paul Junior in terms of sound

The following year, Gibson introduced triple-pickup and 12-string versions, the Melody Maker III and Melody Maker-12. Nevertheless, come the early 70s, all five SG-style Melody Makers were dropped from the catalogue. The Melody Maker and Melody Maker Double were effectively replaced by the short-lived SG 100/100-W and SG 250/200/200-W, respectively. G

The Evolution of the Gibson Melody Maker

Early 1959
Melody Maker & Melody Maker 3/4 introduced; single-cutaway; 1x pickup

Late 1959
Melody Maker D introduced; single-cutaway; 2x pickups

1960
Pickup cover narrows from 7/8" to 5/8"

1961
Double-cutaway; 16th-fret neck/body join retained; compensated 'lightning' bar bridge/tailpiece

1962
Vibrato optional

1965
Sharper double-cutaway horns; 18th-fret neck/body join; cherry red replaces sunburst finish

1966
SG-style body; Pelham Blue or Fire Engine Red finishes; vibrato standard

1967
Melody Maker III (3x pickups) & Melody Maker-12 introduced; Pelham Blue or Sparkling Burgundy finishes

1969
Walnut finish (exc. Melody Maker-12); Melody Maker 3/4 discontinued

1971
All discontinued; replaced by SG 100/100-W (MM) & SG 250/200/200-W (MMD)

1963 Gibson Melody Maker D

1. SERIAL NUMBER
Six digits on upper rear of headstock

2. HEADSTOCK
Narrow profile; gold Gibson logo decal; black nitrocellulose finish

3. PLASTICS
White oval tuner buttons; black truss rod cover; single-ply black pickguard embossed 'Melody Maker'; two black pickup covers; four 'reflector' knobs; white switch tip

4. HARDWARE
Nickel-plated: compensated bridge (Maestro Vibrola removed) and open-back strip tuners

5. PICKUPS
Attached to pickguard: two PU-380 single coils with independent volume and tone controls (four pots); three-way selector switch; jack

6. BODY
Solid mahogany; 1 3/8-inch deep; symmetrical double-cutaway; sunburst nitrocellulose finish

7. NECK
Mahogany; 24 ¾-inch scale; unbound, 22-fret Brazilian rosewood fingerboard with dot markers; joins body at 16th fret

Guitarist **would like to thank Brandy Row for showing us this fantastic example**

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS

David Davidson's Vintage Icons

The amazing story of a prototype Bigsby Tele in an unusual sunburst finish

1951 Fender Telecaster

This unique sunburst Fender Telecaster comes with a Bigsby and a whole lotta history

"I have all the history on this guitar. It's an interesting story. Back in 1998, the original owner – a guy by the name of Verlin Whitford – sent me photos of it. On the back of a photo, he'd written '1951 Tele and original case' along with his name and phone number. So I called him right away and said, 'Hey, that's a cool Telecaster. Can you tell me about it?'

"As it turned out, Verlin and Leo Fender had a close mutual friend, and so he was able to visit the factory in person with the aim of collecting an Esquire he'd ordered. He lived right down the road in Fullerton. When he got there, he was told it wasn't ready to collect. However, because his buddy was friends with Leo, the two of them were offered a tour of the factory. They walked around and when he was in the amplifier area, Verlin spotted an Esquire painted in sunburst – not the sunburst Tele featured here, although I do also happen to own the Esquire, too! When he asked the factory guys about it, they told him they didn't normally make Esquires or Telecasters in sunburst [blonde was the standard finish] and that it was an experimental build. But Verlin offered to buy it anyway, even though it was something of a test mule. At that point, he asked if it would be possible for them to add a second pickup, making it a dual-pickup Esquire. So he bought it, took it home, played it and loved it.

"A couple of weeks later, Verlin goes back to Fender to collect the regular blonde Esquire that he'd ordered. While he's at the factory, he decides to have another look around and spots one of the techs working with a gizmo that he'd never seen on a Fender guitar before. It was a Bigsby vibrato. But this one was different because it was made for a Telecaster body, rather than an archtop. At the time, the guitar's neck and body were just raw wood – no paint. The tech told him it was a unit they just got in from Paul Bigsby and that they were trying to figure out how it all went together. So Verlin told one of the Fender guys, 'If you can paint that guitar in sunburst, I'll take it!' They didn't quite know if the Bigsby was going to work, but Verlin said, 'If it does work, I'd love to take it to Korea with me.' They agreed on a deal and several weeks later the guitar was done.

> "The B16 Bigsby is different from any other I've ever seen on a Telecaster"

"This guitar is so ancient. The B16 Bigsby is different from any other B16 I've ever seen on a Telecaster. It's got a fixed arm with a really wide spoon handle – giant! It feels very different to play and you can't move it down. Engineering-wise, it seems kind of weird. The pickguard is bespoke in order to accommodate the Bigsby and the bridge plate is gone. There's a wooden shim in the neck pocket – because the height and angle need to change – but on every other Bigsby Telecaster I've ever seen the shim is aluminium. This one is made from ebony and is stamped 'Bigsby & Company'. It's the prototype of the B16 Telecaster.

"So Mr Whitford is going off to fight in Korea and wants to take this guitar with him. He engraves his military identification number, social security number and phone number into the Bigsby in case the guitar is lost, or it can get back to his family in the worst-case scenario.

"Interestingly, when I first spoke to Mr Whitford, we could not agree on a price. He wanted $6,500 in 1998 and I told him I couldn't give him $6,500 because that's what I'd sell it for. We did not have an agreement. But we did agree prices on the sunburst and blonde Esquires. Several weeks later, he brought this Bigsby sunburst Tele out to a guitar show in Pomona, California. He was showing it around trying to get an offer, but nobody bought it. However, about six months later, a gentleman in Pennsylvania answered a classified ad and he was then able to sell it for $10,000.

"Fast forward to about four or five years ago, I got a call from a guy completely out of the blue. He said, 'I have a very interesting guitar you might like to hear about.' He goes on to tell me it's a 1951 Telecaster in sunburst, so I said, 'And it has a Bigsby?' Which stopped him dead. He goes, 'Yes!' I said, 'Did you buy it from a guy named Verlin Whitford?' And he goes, 'Yes! I guess this might be your second chance to buy it?' Suffice to say, I was on my way home with it the next day." **[RB]**

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York
www.wellstrungguitars.com / info@wellstrungguitars.com / 001 (516) 221-0563

A chance encounter at Fender's factory led to Verlin Whitford, an acquaintance of Leo Fender, becoming this guitar's original owner

PHOTOS BY PAIGE DAVIDSON/WELLSTRUNG GUITARS

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks

Soloing With Chords

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Knaggs Choptank & Vox AC15 C1
Difficulty ★★★★★ | 10 mins per example

Kirk Fletcher's space-filling chords and single notes don't rely on tons of gain

PHOTO BY LELAND HAYWARD

OUR ABILITY TO SOLO over any chord progression is greatly enhanced by understanding the content of those chords, even if we choose to stay purely within the pentatonic/blues scale shapes. With this example solo, I'm essentially turning this approach on its head, building chord/solo ideas over a fairly harmonically simple bass and drum backing. In other words, there are just two chords!

You're free to fill the space between the bass and drums in a variety of ways. My approach was to steal some ideas from Kirk Fletcher and string together different chord inversions or triads around the fretboard. I saw these as my building blocks in the same way that you might visualise the pentatonic shapes as your options when putting together a single-note solo. As you work out which shapes fit where in the progression (and on the fretboard), you 'unlock' new levels of possibility – and indeed complexity.

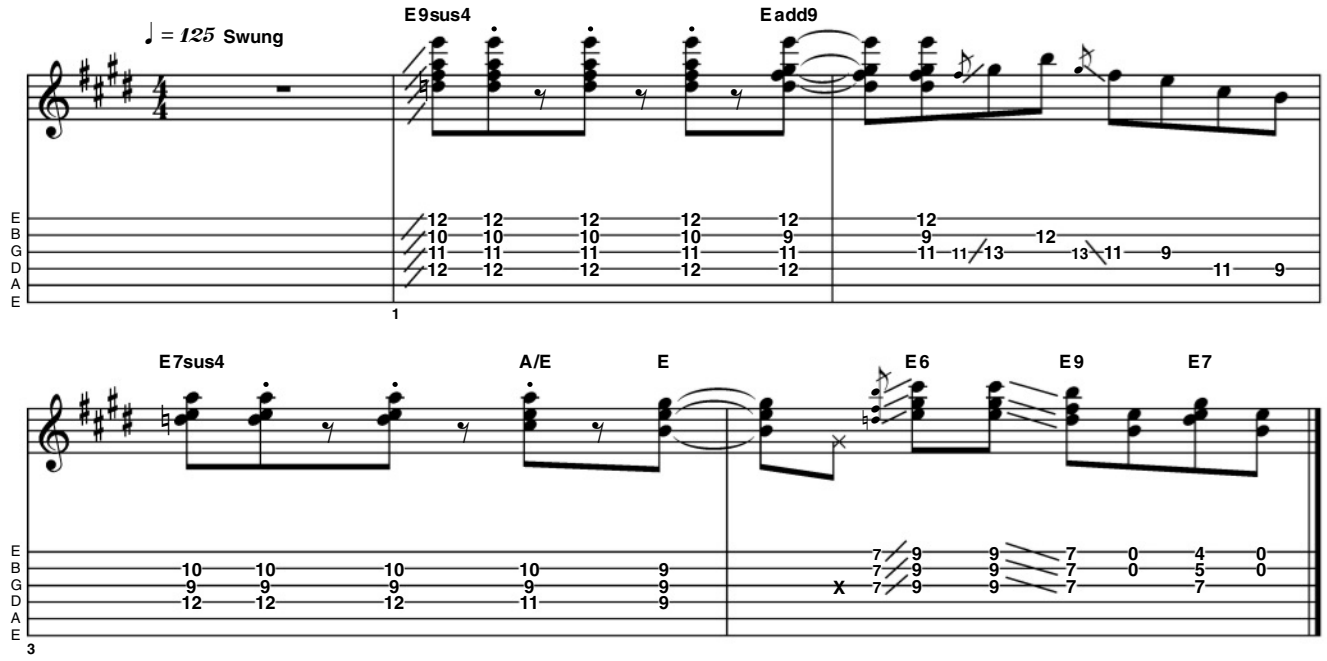
Of course, I haven't played this exclusively in chord shapes; there are a few pentatonic lines linking the chords here and there. It's really a matter of taste how you balance the chord and single-note content in a 'trio' situation such as this. I tend to find stating the chords strongly early on can give the listener helpful context in case you want to get more 'out there' with single notes later.

To allow the chord voicings to shine through, I've kept the gain pretty low throughout, though there is enough to stop single-note lines getting too thin. Playing at high volume really helps for tones like this, but if that's not an option, try a little compression. In the signal chain after a drive pedal tends to mimic the behaviour of a loud amp better than before, but there is no definitive right or wrong way. Hope you enjoy and see you next time!

Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now from ***www.richardbarrettguitar.com***

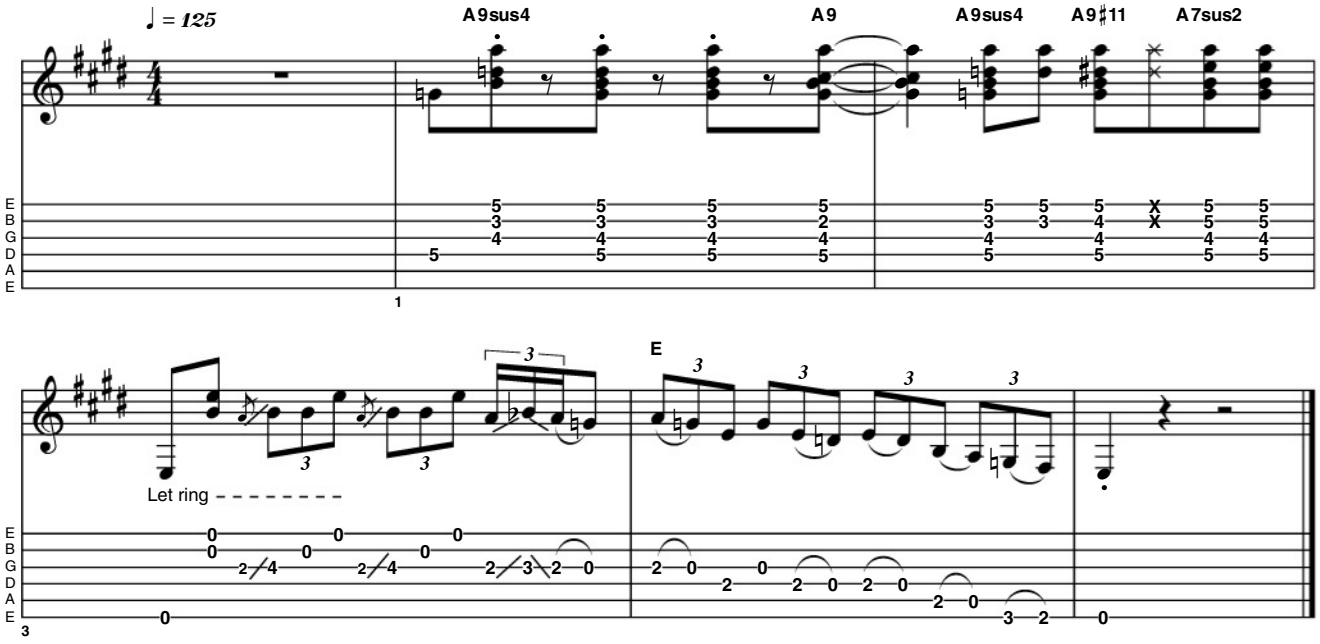
Example 1

THIS FIRST EXAMPLE is played over an implied E chord. I've gone with a major approach and several permutations of E-Esus4-E7 using no more than four notes/strings, which helps move the shapes around more quickly and smoothly. I've notated the name of each chord in the transcription. Be aware that a chord/solo approach such as this is often around 80 per cent worked out and 20 per cent improvised. As you get more familiar with your options that could change!



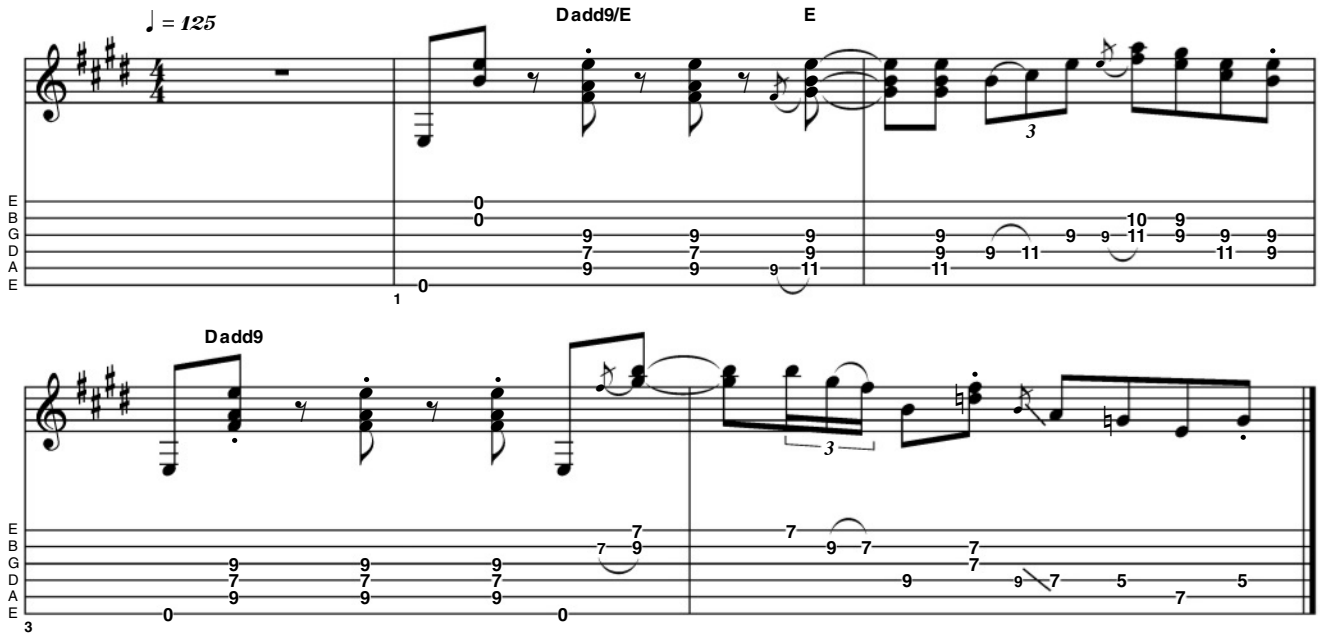
Example 2

MOVING TO A, or the IV chord, this example starts with the same chord idea as Example 1, transposed down to the appropriate position. Bar 2 features a chromatic run up the B string within the chords – an idea lifted from Robben Ford. The premise is simple enough, but you might find it takes the odd switch around in fretting-hand fingering to get this sounding smooth. From there, it's a change back to E and open-position pentatonic lick.

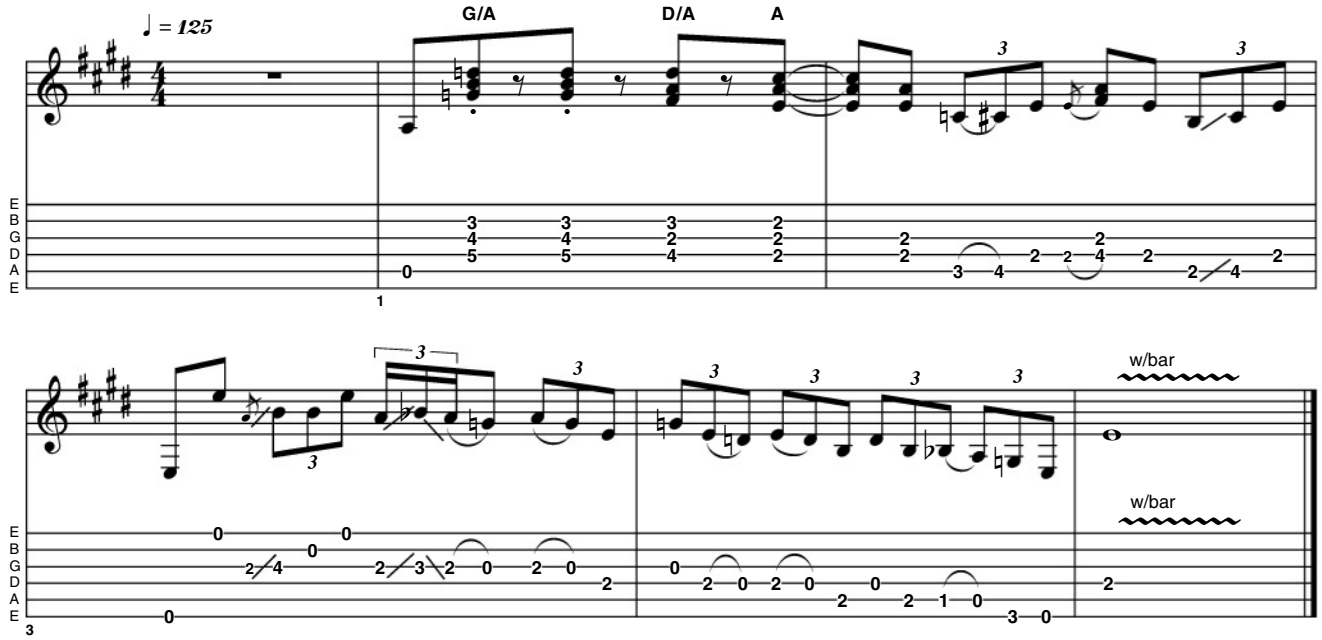


Example 3

BACK TO E and I've opted for some voicings on the lower strings, starting with what I guess you'd call a Dadd9/E. This was a random accident that pleased me – it's also one of the voicings Jimmy Page uses in Zeppelin's *Ramble On*. Shifting up two frets, I'm then experimenting with a bit of E major pentatonic before jumping back to repeat a similar idea. A little bit of E minor pentatonic creeps in at the end – you'll recognise it by the G natural.



Example 4

BACK ON THE IV CHORD (A), I've started by superimposing G and D major triads over the A bass note – as many a Who fan might – before switching to a more rock 'n' roll/boogie figure, based round an A chord. For the change back to E, I've made use of the nearby open-position E minor pentatonic. I'm letting open strings ring to create a bit of texture and fill out the sound, so it doesn't suddenly thin out after the chords.

Hear It Here

KIRK FLETCHER
SHADES OF BLUE

Harking back to 2004, this early release features Kirk switching seamlessly between chords and single notes, filling the space without needing a huge distorted sound or lots of notes. Check out *Blues For Boo Boo* (which just happens to use some similar chord voicings to the example solo), *Country Girl* and *The River's Invitation* for some nice variations on this style. It's also well worth checking out his playing on the rest of the album for a variety of other ideas well worth stealing!

ROBBEN FORD
A DAY IN NASHVILLE

As the name suggests, this collection was recorded pretty much live 'off the floor' in one day. More rootsy blues and less jazzy than some of Robben's earlier solo material, the album still contains plenty of interesting lines and chords that will have you wanting to skip back for another listen. Check out *Midnight Comes Too Soon*, *Top Down Blues* and *Just Another Country Road*. This is more of a 'band' sound than a solo-fest, but there are lots of good ideas to be found here.

ERIC JOHNSON
AH VIA MUSICOM

Though Eric Johnson is deservedly renowned for his unique and much emulated approach to flowing pentatonic lines, he is also a master at filling the space in a trio format using ear-catching chord voicings – and this is often combined with a touch of chorus and/or modulated delay, too, which gives a great sense of space. Check out how he manages to weave chords and melody together in *Steve's Boogie*, *Trademark* and *Righteous*. *Forty Mile Town* is another nice example to investigate.

Guitarist

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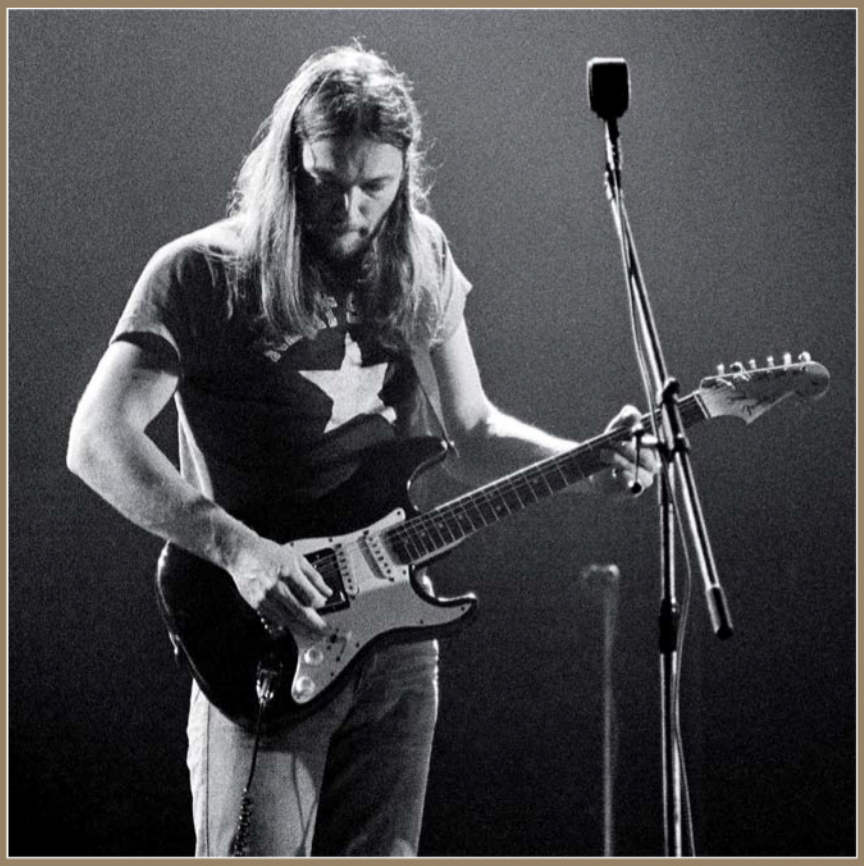

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PINK FLOYD

Celebrating the 50th anniversary of Floyd's monumental *Dark Side Of The Moon* album

JOHN FRUSCIANTE

On his return to the Chilli Peppers and the guitars that power the funk

HÖFNER S7L

Discovering the mystery guitar that Hugh Cornwell used on The Stranglers' hit single *Golden Brown*

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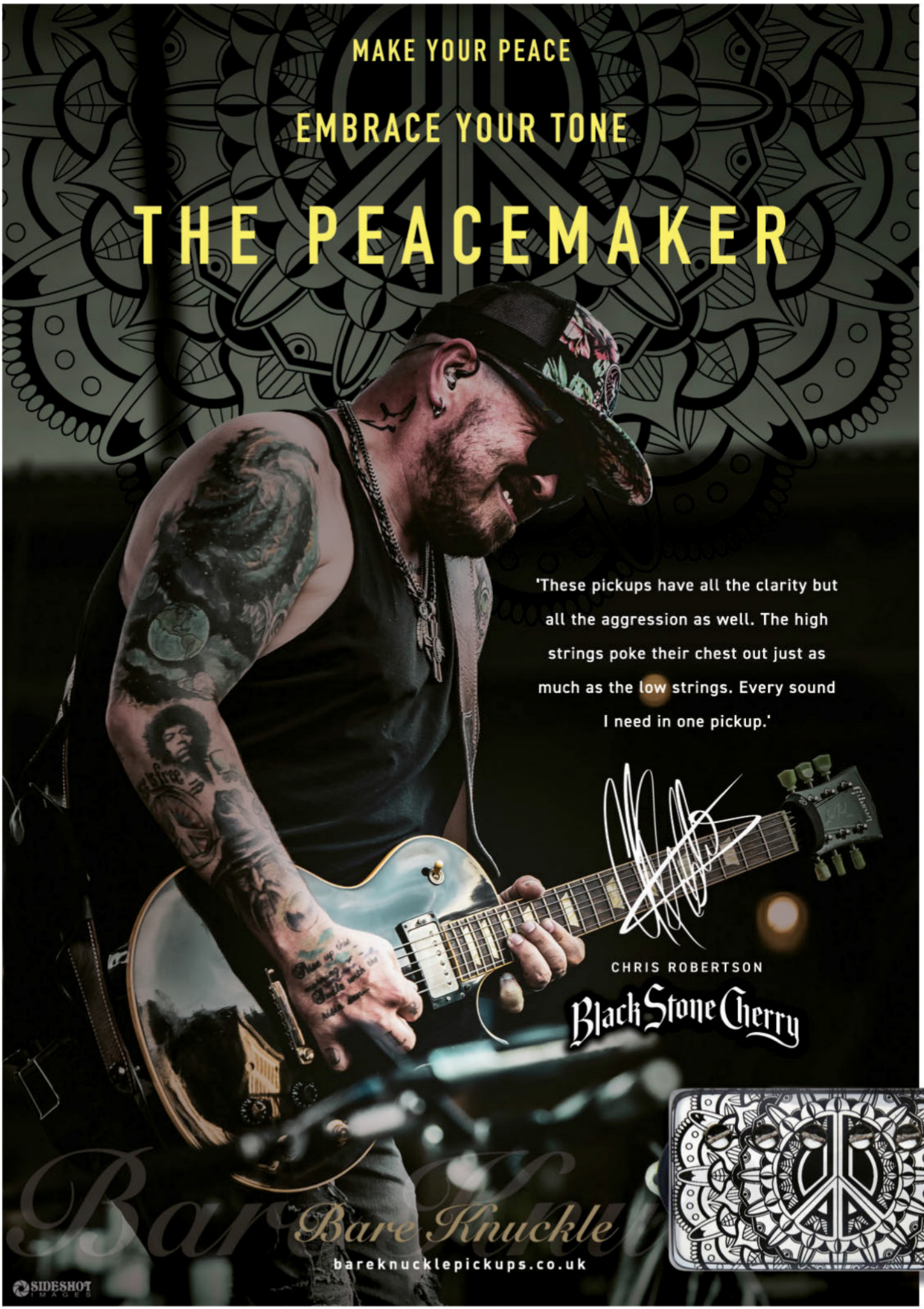
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